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THE ORIGINS OF ‘HERESY’ ON MOUNT ATHOS: ILARION’S NA GORAKH KAVKAZA (1907)

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The 1913 upheaval on Mouth Athos pitted “insurgent” Russian monks against the Orthodox establishment on the Holy Mountain, in Istanbul and St. Petersburg. Given the difficult international climate in the Balkans, the insecurity of the Greek civil authorities’ hold over Mount Athos, and also the shaky internal situation within Imperial Russia, the “uprising” among Athonite monks inevitably involved Greek and Russian civil authorities in efforts to mediate, then to suppress the “insurgency.” With the intrusion of civil authorities into the religious affairs of the Holy Mountain, the dispute dividing “insurgent” monks and the clerical establishment acquired an overt political character that each group tried to manipulate to its own advantage. Yet, at bottom, the Mount Athos affair was a dispute over a theological proposition - the divinity of Jesus’ name. Consequently, any attempt to analyze the origins of the 1913 upheaval among Athonite monks must investigate how that theological debate was constructed.

The disagreement over the divinity of Jesus’ name revolved around the teachings of an obscure itinerant monk, Ieroskhimonakh Ilarion (Domrachev), whose 1907 book, Na gorakh Kavkaza, [In the Mountains of the Caucasus] was avidly read by monks on the Holy Mountain. Although the book passed through ecclesiastic censorship without difficulty in 1907 and was reprinted twice before

1 Ieroskhimonakh Ilarion, Na gorakh Kavkaza. Beseda dvukh startsev pustynnikov o vnutrennom edinenii s Gospodinom nashikh serdets cherez molitvu Iisusu Khrisotovu ili dakhovnaiia deiatel’nost’ sovremennykh pustynnikov (Moscow, 1907).
1912, *Na gorakh Kavkaza* was by no means universally admired. In 1909 several Athonite monks - Khrisanf (Minaev) of the Il’inskii Skete, Ieroskhimonakh Aleksei (Kireevskii) of Novaia Fiviada retreat, and Ieromonakh Agafodor of Panteleimon Monastery - had expressed doubts about its theological soundness. By 1910, supporters of Father Ilarion already complained of “mistreatment” by the book’s critics, whose number now included Skhimonakh Avraamy, the religious superior at Novaia Fiviada retreat: acting on his own volition, Father Avraamy instructed priests at the retreat not to admit Ilarion’s followers to the sacrament of confession. Inside Panteleimon Monastery feelings about the dispute ran so high that, in fall 1911, Igumen Misail forbade monks “under pain of denial of the Holy Eucharist, to speak in [Novaia Fiviada] skete - even with priests in spiritual conference - about Jesus’ name.” Yet this stricture did not put an end to the brotherly disagreements which finally erupted into public venues in 1912. In that year Brother Krisanf published a negative review of Ilarion’s *Na gorakh Kavkaza* accusing the author of purveying “heresy.” Then, on 12 September, Ecumenical Patriarch Ioakim III condemned the book as contrary to the faith and prohibited Athonite monks from reading it. In spite of the concerted effort by Ilarion’s opponents to criticize, marginalize and ultimately suppress *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, the book’s admirers remained loyal to its central idea - the divine power of Jesus’ name. The

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4 Polovinkin, “Khronika Afonskogo dela,” p. 204.

intellectual leader of Ilarion’s supporters, Ieroskhimonakh Antonii (Bulatovich), openly defied the book’s critics including the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Plainly, the disagreement over Na gorakh Kavkaza suggests that the book possessed, for good or ill, tremendous spiritual force. Reading it drove some men to their knees in emulation of the author’s extraordinary piety and then raised them to their feet to defend its life-transforming insight. Others it drove to intense anxiety for their souls, to repulsion from its “diabolical” ideas.

About the author of Na gorakh Kavkaza we have only cursory biographical information. According to documents in the State Archive of the Stavropol’ Region, Ilarion was born as Ianvari Domrachev in Viatsk province “around 1845,” studied four years in seminary, and worked briefly as a school teacher. In 1872 Ianvari Domrachev arrived on Mount Athos where he entered Panteleimon Monastery. There he took his monastic vows, receiving the name Ilarion. According to two sources, he lived on the Holy Mountain for twenty years, but the exact date of his departure is uncertain. At some point, “around 1892,” Ilarion left Mount Athos for New Athens Monastery (Novyi Afon), located twenty-five versts inland from the Black Sea coastal town Sukhumi in present-day Abkhaziia.

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8 Bolshakoff claimed that Ilarion “was sent to New Athos Monastery in the Caucasus” . . . “around 1892.” Russian Mystics, p. 245. M. B. Danilushkin wrote that Skhimonakh Ilarion “spent more than twenty years” at Panteleimon Monastery, saying of his departure only that “there are indications that he was still living there in the [18]80s,” M. B. Danilushkin, “Posleslovie. Kratkii ocherk zhizni startsa Ilariiona i istorii imiaslaviia v Rossii,” in Skhimonakh Ilarion, Na gorakh Kavkaza (St. Petersburg: Voskresenie, 1998), p. 901.
While at Panteleimon Monastery, Ilarion resided apart from the main dormitory buildings and central complex that housed most of the monastery’s eight hundred monks. He lived in a small *kel’ia* [Greek: *kellion*] or cell with a handful of like-minded brothers who sought to find God through interior prayer and rigorous discipline under the direction of the elder Desiderii. A photograph of the *kel’ia* shows a rectangular stuccoed building with seven-foot high walls, short and narrow casement windows, and a short pitched metal roof resting on rough cut timber. In spite of his residential isolation, Ilarion was apparently widely known among the monks at Panteleimon. It was not uncommon for brothers living in the dormitories to approach a *kelliot* for spiritual counsel. Moreover, residents of the various cells participated in worship at the Pokrovskii Sobor, in the heart of the monastery. At any rate, two decades after he had left Mount Athos, many of his former associates sent a positive character evaluation to Archbishop Nikon (Rozhdestvenskii).

We have virtually no direct evidence concerning Ilarion’s activities in Panteleimon Monastery, but recent scholarship has shed new light on developments inside the monastery that almost certainly played a part in Ilarion’s distinctive spiritual formation. Nicholas Fennell has called the period 1875-1888 the “golden age” for Russians on Athos, and especially for monks at Panteleimon Monastery. As the chief factor in this golden age Fennell cited the leadership of Igumen Makarii, the first ethnic Russian abbott of Panteleimon Monastery. Makarii stabilized the precarious finances of the monastery, launched a building program for Panteleimon’s affiliate dependencies in Moscow, Odessa, Istanbul and the

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10 “Otkrytoe pis’mo sviatogortsev-ispovednikov imeni Bozhiia k arkhepiskopu Nikonu, 9 aprelia 1913 goda,” in *Zabytuye stranitsy russkogo imiaslavii*, p. 38. The monks described Ilarion as “a former Athonite very well known to us personally.” Since Nikon had attacked Ilarion’s book, the description was an attempt to vouch for his sound moral character.

Caucasus, and took care to house and succor the thousands of Russian pilgrim
visitors streaming to the Holy Mountain every year. He also undertook ambitious
efforts to develop the monastery’s intellectual life. He subsidized the journal
_Dushepoleznyi sobesednik_ [Spiritual Collocutor], which publicized “the relics,
various miracles and legends of Athos” for a popular audience.\(^\text{12}\) He funded the
publication in 1877 of a Russian-language version of the _Philokalia_, the standard
collection of Orthodox writings concerning prayer and monastic life.\(^\text{13}\) Makary also
supported the activities of the monastery’s extraordinary librarian, father Matvei,
who tripled the monastery’s collection of Greek manuscripts and rapidly expanded
its holdings of books.\(^\text{14}\) Father Matvei enlisted other monks in book purchasing and
preservation, thereby establishing the Panteleimon library as a crucial point of
reference for scholars in church history and theology.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{12}\) See Fennell, _The Russians on Athos_, pp. 154-155. The journal was founded in
1866 and published at Panteleimon Monastery. Makary shifted the place of
publication to Russia and increased the circulation. He also added to the journal
coverage of social issues such as alcoholism, the dangers of smoking and the
problems of sectarianism.

\(^{13}\) A compilation of patristic and later sources, the _Philokalia_ was published in the
Greek language in Venice, in 1782. A Slavonic translation by Paisii (Velichkovskii)
appeared in 1793 under the title _Dobrotoliubie_. The five-volume Russian language version by Feofan (Govorov) included materials not found in the
Slavonic text. Its publication at Panteleimon Monastery was a landmark
event for the monastery but also for Russian spirituality.

\(^{14}\) In the decade from 1880 to 1889 the number of Greek manuscripts increased
from 264 to 850. Most were purchased from other monasteries on Mount Athos
which “de-accessioned” manuscripts in order to repair dilapidated buildings or
cover other expenses. See Arkhimandrit Avgustin (Nikitin), “Afon i russkaia
pravoslavnaia tserkov”. (Obzor tserkovno-literaturnykh sviazei),” _Bogoslovskie

\(^{15}\) Father Matvei won an honorary degree from the Paris Academy of Sciences for
his learning as church historian. See Akhimandrit Augustin (Nikitin), “Afon i russkaya
pravoslavnaya tserkov?,” p. 101. According to Aleksei Smirnov, who
visited Panteleimon in the mid 1880s, the Russian monks, “understanding the great
value of old literary monuments, are avidly buying manuscripts if they come up for
sale from the other monasteries on Athos.” See Smirnov, _Dve nedeli na Sviatoi
Gore_ (Moscow, 1887) p. 14.
Panteleimon monastery’s golden age had a powerful impact on Ilarion. During his two decades on the Holy Mountain, he read the *Philokalia* and other sources on interior prayer with great care. The pages of *Na gorakh Kavkaza* are littered with citations from the desert fathers, from the leading theologians of the Orthodox church and from the most important Orthodox mystics. Since Ilarion was an autodidact with no formal training in a spiritual academy, his personal familiarity with Orthodoxy’s spiritual treasures could only have developed on Athos. (Subsequently, as we shall see, he had no access to a serious spiritual library, because he lived in difficult conditions, often in complete isolation from society.) Although Ilarion was not a licensed theologian, he was a remarkably self-confident writer on complex matters of interior prayer and its theological significance. That self-confidence was born of his experience as an adept in interior prayer, of his wide reading, but also of his belief that an untutored “simple” person can understand profound spiritual truths. Perhaps in this respect the charismatic Father Matvei served as a good example to Ilarion.

The very success of Igumen Makarii in making Panteleimon Monastery a magnet for Russian pilgrims diminished its attractiveness to those monks who, like Ilarion, had opted to flee society to find God. Bolshakoff has suggested that Ilarion “was sent to the New Athos Monastery in the Caucasus to teach in the school attached to that monastery,” but there is good reason to qualify that assertion. Ilarion could not have left Panteleimon against his own will, even if ordered to go by the abbott. If he was “sent,” the decision was made in consultation

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16 Fennell estimated that, by the turn of the twentieth century, “between twenty and twenty-five thousand Russians would go on pilgrimages to the East every year.” “On the way to or from Palestine,” he continued, “most of the Russian male pilgrims disembarked at Mount Athos. They were allowed to stay for as long as they wanted, although two months was the recommended minimum period to see all the sights.” *The Russians on Athos*, p. 156. Three-hundred-fifty pilgrims might disembark from a single tourist ship on a given day. That these tourist/pilgrims distracted the monks was clear from the observations of Skhiarkhimonakh Varsonofii of Optina Pustyn’ Monastery.

with his spiritual elder Desiderii whose hope was to pursue interior prayer in an isolated place far from the distractions of the over-crowded Holy Mountain. When Ilarion took up residence at Novyi Afon “around 1892,” his formal duty was to teach at the monastic school. Like all the monks at Novyi Afon, Ilarion was expected to proselytize the mostly Muslim Abkhazians. Yet his principal activity was interior prayer under his elder’s guidance. At some point during Ilarion’s residence at Novyi Afon, the elder Desiderii, finding the common monastic life wearisome, began to spend time in the deep mountains away from the monastery where he could pray without distraction. Ilarion joined the elder there from time to time: the setting mentioned in Na gorakh Kavkaza - the “treeless mountains” above the Urup River Valley - was perhaps their meeting place. After prayer, Ilarion

18 Beginning in 1874, the Panteleimon monks had canvased the Caucasus for a site large enough to accommodate all six thousand Russian monks currently on Mount Athos. The reason was fear that, in the event of war with Turkey, Athonite Russians might be forced to leave the Ottoman Empire. Although the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war left the Russians on Athos unharmed, the monks pressed ahead with the founding of their new monastery. It was chartered by Alexander II in 1879. Fennell, The Russians on Athos, p. 168. The charter of the monastery, christened Novo-Afonskii Simono-Kananitskii Monastyr’ [New Athos St. Simon the Canaanite Monastery], provided that conduct of the monks would fall under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, but that its internal operations and management would be the responsibility of the Panteleimon Monastery on Athos. The idea was that the New Athonite monks would take advantage of “these exclusive rights” to constitute the monastery a Christian beacon in the largely Muslim Abkhazian environment. See Hoover Institution Archives, Russian Greek Mission Papers, Box 59, folder 25. Novyi Afon. “Kopiia otnosheniia Kantseliarii Ober-Prokurora Sviateishego Sinoda, za No. 11423.” [Undated.] After the Russo-Turkish war, when it had become plain that Russian monks need not leave the Holy Mountain en masse, plans for New Athos were revised: Panteleimon Monastery decided to send “up to fifty brothers” in the first group, with the number to increase later. The monastery charter made clear missionary activity was its primary purpose: “May the newly-founded monastery oflineflourish in peace and quiet on the shores of Abkhazia and may it serve the local population, mired in savagery and ignorance, as an example of peaceful and productive life, as a paragon of charity, caring and patient good will.” HIA, Russian Greek Mission Papers, Box 59, folder 26. Novyi Afon. “Ustav Novogo Afona, 8 iiulia 1880 goda.”

19 Na gorakh Kavkaza. p. 3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations below refer to the 1907 edition.
and Desiderii conducted long conversations on the mechanics of the Jesus prayer, on its psychological ramifications, social impact and theological significance. After Desiderii’s death, Ilarion tried to write down the essence of these conversations. His notations became the basis for part one of Na gorakh Kavkaza.  

Following Desiderii’s passing, Ilarion returned frequently to the wilderness. For a time he lived near the small town of Teberda, close to Mount Dombai and Mount El’bruz, in the Kuban’ region of lower Cherkassia. In 1899 he organized a women’s contemplative religious community, Pokrovskaiia obshchina, in the tiny settlement Temnye Buki on the Markhot Ridge of the Caucasus, between Anapa and Novorossiisk, not far from the Strait of Kerch. Five years later this community received official sanction to constitute itself a women’s monastery. The restless Ilarion made the monastery his new base of operations, but he continued to seek other places of refuge. According to a recent biographical note, Ilarion eventually “wandered the entire Caucasus region from Black Sea to Caspian Sea,” “carrying only a knapsack with dried bread, a teapot and a hatchet to cut timber.”  

From fragmentary, recently published archival material we can begin to reconstruct a picture of Ilarion’s life in Temnye Buki. There he sheltered in a rough-hewn, two-room cottage where he prayed and offered spiritual counsel to his followers and to pilgrim visitors. Members of his spiritual community lived in separate, equally primitive dwellings in the surrounding forest. The Monastery barely managed to support itself, since its members were forced to pay rent for their land to a local landowner. In 1911 Ilarion described his community as “cast-offs from the world [otrebie mira],” “people without rights [liudi pespravnye], and worst  

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20 Testimony concerning these conversations between Desiderii and his “student” Ilarion can be found in Besedy Skhiarkhimonakh Optinskogo skita startsa Varsonofiiia s dukhovnymi det’mi (St. Petersburg, 1991) p 58; quoted in Danilushkin, “Posleslovie,” p. 902.  
of all almost universally despised.” He appealed to the secular and religious authorities to subsidize his monastery, but to no avail.

In spite of the difficulties facing it, Ilarion’s monastery attracted a handful of sisters to serve God under its regulations. In addition, Ilarion had other followers who clustered in the forest near his shelter and close to the monastery. A 1914 letter from the Stavropol’ Spiritual Consistory mentioned five of his most committed followers by name: Matrona Kamenobrodskaiia, a married woman living separately from her husband, serving as Ilarion’s secretary; Ksenia Poliaika, an unmarried Cossack woman; Evfim Miroshnikov, a peasant; Trofim Savchenko; and the monk Vladimir Kiriliuk. Of this “inner core” the most important figure may have been Kiriliuk, whom the Stavropol’ consistory described as Ilarion’s “pupil” and “assistant [sotrudnik]” in composing Na gorakh Kavkaza.

Ilarion wrote various drafts of his book while at Temnye Buki. In a letter to L. Z. Kuntsevich, he depicted the physical and intellectual difficulties that faced him, as would-be author, in the wilderness:

Can you even imagine the inconveniences for a writer that unavoidably accompany our isolated life? We hermits have no comfortable dwelling, but a primitive hut of some sort thrown together from tree branches, chinked with clay, having dark windows that will scarcely permit us to see a page; it often happens that there is neither a table for writing nor a chair for sitting, nor candle for illumination at night.

….Most of the time, especially in summer, one has to write in the forest, arranging oneself on a fallen tree or stump. Sometimes I lie on my chest on the ground and jot down thoughts with a pencil. Where do we borrow in our deserted wilderness the books we need for writing? There are none at all. Where is the advisor who can resolve perplexity at moments of spiritual darkness? Utterly alone, I

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22 See “Proshenie skhimonaka Ilariona sviaschenno-arkhimandritu Germanu, nastoitel’u Zosimovoi pustyni,” in Skhimonakh Ilarion, Na gorakh Kavkaza, pp. 931 – 932. The original petition can be found in the papers of Pavel Florenskii, in the custody of Igumen Andronik (Trubachev).
must think through and resolve all the puzzling questions [that assail me].

Ilarion’s description of the obstacles facing him as writer was probably exaggerated. We have already seen that Vladimir Kiriliuk helped him with *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, probably by making fair copies of his drafts, supplying writing implements and the like. Kiriliuk and others may have served as informal sounding boards for Ilarion’s ideas, although we should take at face value Ilarion’s claim that he had in Temnye Buki no real peers who could provide a theologically sophisticated response to his text. On Ilarion’s claim to have no books to consult in the wilderness, we should be skeptical. In fact, we cannot exclude the possibility that he had at hand a few books – the gospels and the *Philokalia*, for example. In 1914, an official from the Stavropol’ Spiritual consistory mentioned that, in Ilarion’s cell at Temnye Buki, “among various books there was printed and handwritten literature on veneration of God’s name as God. All the papers, brochures, books and notebooks found in Ilarion’s cell he insisted on taking with him” to present to the local consistory office. If such a small library was in Ilarion’s possession in 1914, perhaps a smaller number of books and papers was in his cell earlier when he wrote *Na gorakh Kavkaza*. The church historian Ilarion (Alfeev) has recently assumed that Ilarion must have used “prepared notes” for his citations.

In spite of the relative isolation of Temnye Buki and his peripatetic life, Ilarion kept in contact with his original community on Mount Athos, learning of significant events on the Holy Mountain from other travelers in the Caucasus and from brother monks at Novyi Afon. After the turn of the century, he heard reports

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24 “Pis’mo iz Stavropol’skoi dukhovnoi konsistorii Nachal’niku Kubanskoi oblasti ot 17 noiabria 1914,” in Ilarion (Alfeev), *Sviashchenniaia taina tserkvi, Tom vtoroi*, p. 405.

25 Ilarion (Alfeev), *Sviashchenniaia taina tserkvi, Tom pervyi*, p. 300.
that at least one Athonite monk had asked for a “blessing” from a woman, “Mother
Natal’ia,” who claimed to have constant visions of the Mother of God and who
could communicate with Mary at will. When Mother Natal’ia made a pilgrimage to
Jerusalem, her ship docked at Dafne, the Athonite port of call; many monks went to
the shore to pay respects to her by bowing to the earth. For some reason, Ilarion
suspected Mother Natal’ia of being an impostor so he wrote a letter upbraiding the
credulous monks and imploring his former associates on Athos to place no trust in
“the peasant woman Natal’ia who has succumbed to temptation.”26 In 1907, Ilarion
mentioned this incident in Na gorakh Kavkaza as an example of the frivolous
temptation that can befall monks if they do not attend to the Jesus prayer. Although
the letter by Ilarion may have played a role subsequently in stirring up opposition to
his book among the Athonite monks he accused of credulity, what is most striking
about the incident is that he wrote to other Russian monks so boldly, with a tone of
religious authority. It is as if the death of his own elder Desiderii freed Ilarion to
take the mantle of starets on his own shoulders.

26 For an account of Mother Natal’ia, see Kosvintsev, “Chernyi ‘bunt’,” pp. 141-
142, and Danilushkin, “Posleslovie,” p. 926. Kosvintsev mentioned that Mother
Natal’ia had acquired a reputation as a seer and “medium” through whom the
Mother of God spoke to contemporary Russians. She was visited in St. Peterburg
by “poor people and millionaires, simple merchants and officials in gold-braided
uniforms.” Both Kosvintsev and Danilushkin considered Ilarion’s reproach to the
credulous Athonite monks a factor in the opposition that eventually developed to
Na gorakh Kavkaza. Kosvintsev stated that the monk who, in Jerusalem, had asked
for Mother Natal’ia’s blessing was Ieromonakh Agafodor of Panteleimon
Monastery - the same Agafodor who in 1909 expressed doubts about Ilarion’s
theological soundness. According to Kosvintsev, Agafodor “held a grudge [imel
lichnye chety] against Skhimonakh Ilarion” over the Mother Natal’ia affair.
Danilushkin cited a document in the Russian National Historical Archive, in the
personal papers of V. I. Iatskevich, director of the Synod Procurator’s Chancellery.
The document asserted that Ilarion’s decision to quote the letter in his book “was
one of the chief reasons for the current movement on Athos. The former admirers
of Natal’ia decided to destroy the book whatever the cost, in order by this means to
destroy [Ilarion’s] letter along with it.” RGIA fond 1579, op. 1, delo 81, ll. 19-19
verso. Ironically, after reading Ilarion’s letter, which was passed to her through
intermediaries, Mother Natal’ia “came to reason” and renounced her claim to be a
visionary.
That Ilarion had begun to see himself as a spiritual guide with a crucial message to convey became evident in 1904, when he sent to Panteleimon Monastery a short summary of his experiences wandering the Caucasus. He asked two elders, Fathers Makarii and Feodosii, “to correct errors and strike out the harmful passages” in his manuscript; then he promised, if the summary were approved, “to develop this manuscript to the full.”27 Between mid July 1904 and mid 1905, Ilarion worked on expanding and perfecting his spiritual autobiography. In 1905, he sent the finished manuscript to Panteleimon Monastery. It bore the revealing subtitle, “A Conversation between Two Elders on Inner Unity of Our Hearts with God through the Jesus Prayer, or Spiritual Activity of Contemporary Hermits.” The subtitle signaled that Ilarion now considered himself an “elder” able to guide other monks even as Desiderii had once guided him.

The subject of Na gorakh Kavkaza is the so-called “Jesus prayer”: “Gospodi Iisuse Khriste, Syne Bozhii, pomilui mia greshnago” [Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner]. Ilarion claimed that saying the prayer brings about “a mysterious merging and unity of our souls with the Lord Jesus Christ.” According to Ilarion, although other prayers and sacred activities have their place in the Christian’s struggle to find God, none has what St. Gregory of Sinai called the “incomparable advantage of the Jesus prayer, the overflowing divine energy concealed in it.” Hence, Ilarion placed the Jesus prayer “above all other virtues, regardless of time of place [vezde vyshe vsekh dobrodeiatelei].”28

Having canvassed Orthodox spiritual literature and living monks he respected, Ilarion noticed universal agreement on the proposition that “without prayer to Jesus Christ, we cannot have a spiritual life.”29

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27 Bolshakoff found the original manuscript at the library of Panteleimon Monastery in a file marked: MS 428/1908; “Deistvitel’noe proizshestvie v gorakh Kavkaza (1903).” The letter from Ilarion was dated 10 June 1904. See Bolshakoff, Russian Mystics, p. 245.

28 Ilarion, Na gorakh Kavkaza, pp. v-vii.

29 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xi.
After having described the Jesus prayer as essential to perfection in the spiritual life or rather as a *sine qua non* for any spiritual life whatsoever, Ilarion pointed to the name “Jesus” itself as a key to grasping the prayer’s efficacy. In the Torah and other Jewish religious texts, believers were forbidden to speak God’s sacred name, being licensed to use only the circumlocution or title “Adonai” [Lord]. The actual name of God was a property, an attribute of God’s person bearing in it divine might; therefore, the use of the divine name by a human being was an attempt to misappropriate godly power, to infringe on God’s personal property, to cross the divide between the created world and the Creator. In short, to speak God’s name was to blaspheme. Ilarion observed that, with the coming of Jesus who, as God chose to share human nature, the Torah prohibition against using God’s name was lifted. As Ilarion put it, we only dare to invoke the name of God because the Son has come: earlier “nobody dared and nobody had the right to name Him.”

In Jesus’ name, Ilarion declared, “is to be found the very presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, our sweet Savior.” He acknowledged that “fleshly reason will never accept the proposition that in the name “Jesus” our Lord Jesus Christ is present.” Indeed, he admitted that if “you take away the divinity from the name ‘Jesus Christ,’ it will be a name like any of ours.” Nevertheless, for Ilarion the presence of divinity in the name “Jesus” was a palpable reality. And so it had been recognized to be by Orthodox Christians like John Chrystostom who “conflated into one the Lord’s Name and the Lord, speaking of them without distinguishing and using them together [govorit nerazdel’no i sovokupno], because that is how it is.”

In the Jesus prayer, Ilarion wrote, “an individual has the chance not only to see but to hold spiritual life as if in an embrace, in its entirety and unfathomable

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30 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. vi.
31 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xi.
32 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xiii.
33 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xi.
34 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xvi.
immensity, in its mysterious caverns and its unexplored ocean depths, and in all its ramifications because here, from unity with the Lord, flows all God’s energies, directly from the source itself.”

Because of the power inherent in the Jesus prayer, Ilarion contended, Satan and his minions are always on guard against it. “The devil knows that the prayer unites a person with God and removes the individual from his dark [Satanic] power.” Hence, almost whenever in his prior life Ilarion had heard the subject of the Jesus prayer broached, “immediately there was hostility, quite cruel hostility, from certain quarters.” The subject of the Jesus prayer, therefore, was by no means trivial. Ilarion described it as a “weighty matter” [delo vesovskoe] for individual believers and society at large.

Having laid out the stakes involved in practicing the Jesus prayer, Ilarion turned to the setting where the meditative prayer might fruitfully be undertaken. He reported that neither river valleys, where so many human beings gather to be near life-giving water, nor populous coastal cities were propitious places for interior prayer. Wandering the Caucasus river valleys, Ilarion suffered from a terrible spiritual malaise he called unynie - melancholia, despondency or depression - to which, he claimed, ascetics like himself were prone. Even his beloved elder Desiderii succumbed to fright and deep depression when exploring the almost sunless Kartalin Gorge, a declivity that reminded the starets of the biblical “valley of the shadow of death.” If river valleys of the remote Caucasus were sites of gloom for Ilarion, cities were even more awful. “Whenever I entered a town or even traveled by carriage,” he wrote, “a sea of cares assailed me, and my soul’s every feeling was suppressed by disagreeable impressions, the feeling drowned out by blows of a terrible hammer. Everything was in motion, hurtling swiftly and irresistibly forward. But upon this motion there lay a deathly funeral shroud, its icy

35 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. xiv.
36 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. x.
37 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 3.
38 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 129.
cold piercing the soul, and all these human exertions bore the stamp of mortality. . . . In this stifling atmosphere my spirit felt itself fettered by iron chains, and I literally experienced a hellish torment.”

For Ilarion, the only respite from despondency and hellish torment was uninhabited wilderness, in particular, the treeless peaks of the Caucasus. On these mountain pinnacles, he found, the ascetic could savor “dead calm and utter silence - the absence of life’s cares. Here nature, far from the world, celebrated its exemption from triviality and revealed the mystery of the life to come. Simply put: this was the realm of the spiritual, a realm without rebelliousness - a new world not after the image of the place where people live; it was the untouched temple of the living God where each object spoke His glory.”

In this “temple of the living god” the ascetic monk could finally apprehend God’s greatness and his own limitations. The starry Caucasus sky impressed on Ilarion “a deep feeling of reverence toward my Creator whose mighty omnipotence, limitless authority and incomparable glory shine so clearly in the vault of the night. Then is our heart constricted by fear of God’s majesty and His infinite power. Our pride is diminished and, whether one wants to or not, one recognizes one’s infinite squalor, poverty and utter insignificance in the face of the unfathomable divine might.”

Aware of his own weakness, Ilarion sought some point of connection with his mighty Creator, a point to which he, the wretched creature, could hold fast. That secure point was, of course, the Jesus prayer which acknowledges the wretched sinner’s dependence on the Creator’s mercy.

Ilarion chose to present the secrets of the Jesus prayer through a series of dialogues with his elder Desiderii, whom he introduced gradually over the first two hundred pages of Na gorakh Kavkaza. Initially, Desiderii appeared as an unnamed hermit—“very old, tall, thin as a skeleton,” whom Ilarion met by chance on the

39 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 155.

40 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 5.

41 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 133.
naked mountaintops above the River Urup. The two hermit monks struck up a conversation in which Ilarion’s opening question—“What is the most important thing you learned in the wilderness?”—led immediately to the old man’s answer: “Jesus Christ has touched my heart, and in Him there is, without doubt, eternal life that I can consciously and immediately hear murmured in my heart.” Only thirty pages later did Ilarion disclose that the anonymous elder’s religious name was Desiderii, his “worldly” name Dmitrii. It seems that, as a young man, Dmitrii had lived “an evil and lawless life,” denying God’s existence, refusing to attend church or take the sacraments. His spiritual transformation had begun with a wasting illness—“a disease strange, shameful and very painful,” perhaps of sexual origin, “but one that is rarely encountered among human beings.” Fearing death and hellfire, the sick Dmitrii recalled his mother’s words: “Remember God and keep His commandments, and you will be happy in this life and the next.” When Dmitrii recovered from the illness, he went to a nearby monastery to do prolonged repentance. There he took holy orders, received the name “Desiderii,” and launched his effort to pray the Jesus prayer.

Desiderii reported to Ilarion that he had experienced three stages in his practice of the Jesus prayer. In the first stage, lasting fifteen years, he had recited the Jesus prayer exclusively aloud. Desiderii admitted that, during this time, he “paid no attention whatsoever to the mind and heart, being content with oral recitation of the prayer words alone.” He was conscious that this method was “the lowest, primitive stage” of prayer—“oral, verbal, superficial and bodily.” Yet he did not apologize for his “primitive,” “superficial” recitations. The starets noted that that practice of the Jesus prayer rests on four “pillars”: cultivation of true humility; love for our neighbors “without exception”; purity of mind and body; and

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42 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, p. 7.

43 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, pp. 8-9.

44 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, p. 37.

45 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, p. 9.
genuine sorrow for our sins.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, he said, the practice of the Jesus prayer, even at the “superficial” level, commits the practitioner to a strict regimen of spiritual conditioning that is itself extraordinarily demanding.

After fifteen years, Desiderii suddenly discovered that physical enunciation of the prayer words was no longer necessary: in his words, “the prayer, on its own volition, changed into [silent] mental prayer—that is, the mind started to cling to the words of the prayer, seeing in them the Lord’s presence.” Desiderii was sure that, left to itself, his mind could not have performed this feat of concentration. He observed ruefully that the mind by nature is “forgetful, scattered and dissipated by attachments to the objects and things of this world.”\textsuperscript{47} Even the habitual oral recitation of the Jesus prayer and commitment to the four-pillared regimen of self-purification did not make Desiderii “capable” of mental prayer in the sense of having personal control over it. Instead, the earlier prayer recitations had “emptied” his mind of distractions, made it “utterly blank [sovershennno golym].” The transformation in him that made possible sustained mental prayer was the effect of the “prayer itself” or rather of God’s name in the prayer: “The name of God itself, containing the infinite energy of grace, produces its own effect. It sanctifies the mind, keeps it from straying, enlightens its reason, drives away its natural darkness and blindness.”\textsuperscript{48}

The second stage of the Jesus prayer, Desiderii pointed out, was itself “rather advanced” as a form of spirituality, and therefore deserving of praise. Yet it was still a waystation on the path toward the third and final stage—the prayer of the heart. In preparation for this third stage Desiderii recommended that the practitioner should concentrate physically on the throat or chest during mental prayer, thus readying an imaginary pathway to the heart. He warned adepts, however, quoting Bishop Ignatii Brianchanninov, “not to try to reach the heart

\textsuperscript{46} Na gorakh Kavkaza, pp. 24-25.
\textsuperscript{47} Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{48} Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 56.
before the time is ripe but to rest content with prayer of repentance, keeping oneself humble, obedient and self-possessed.” In cases where practitioners had attempted the prayer of the heart before being ready, they had experienced “pressure from the mind on the heart.” “The consequence,” said Desiderii, was “pressure on the blood surrounding the heart, the blood grows warm, and this warmth passes for the inexperienced practitioner as the action of [divine] grace. Further pressure on this place and the warmth, now passing into the arteries, descends to that place where there occurs a bodily movement -- one of the most regrettable effects of the practice of the Jesus prayer.” In other words, Desiderii warned that premature practice of the prayer of the heart could lead the practitioner to false consciousness, and then to sexual arousal.49

The correct fashion of praying was to proceed into the third stage under the guidance of a spiritual master (nastavnik), or, in the absence of a master, under the instruction of church fathers.50 In either case, the practitioner should approach the heart in fear, as a priest entering the Holy of Holies. “The heart is the throne of the mind on which the Lord Himself is seated. The heart is opened by the finger of God, and our mind enters it as a priest-celebrant or archpriest or simple priest, to serve the Lord.”51 According to Desiderii, once inside the holy sanctuary of the heart, the mind becomes as clear as an azure sky, and the heart itself gains “spiritual élan” and “illumination.”52 The effect of the prayer of the heart on the practitioner is profound, Desiderii contended. At one point, he spoke of the practitioner experiencing a “new birth.”53 In another passage, he talked of “merging [slitie] of our entire spiritual being with the Lord Jesus Christ, whose palpable presence is felt in His Most Holy Name.” Desiderii insisted that this “merging” with Jesus does not

49 Na gorakh Kavkaza, pp. 80-81.
50 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p 65.
51 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 80.
52 Na gorakh Kavkaza, pp. 59-60.
53 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 60.
obliterate our identity, for Jesus presence “penetrates our spirit as a ray of sunlight penetrates glass.”\textsuperscript{54} In this “illuminated condition” the practitioner feels Jesus’ presence, hears His breathing [dykhanie] and becomes “one with Him in spirit,” but without losing self-awareness, personal integrity or freedom.\textsuperscript{55}

Explanation of these three stages in the Jesus prayer required the elder Desiderii to sketch the human psychology on which its progressive development was predicated. As for many Christians, the body was for Desiderii first and foremost a “good” thing, because it was part of the universe of created substances meant to glorify its Creator. Unlike other material things, however, the human body could be made to defile the harmony of creation and to rebel against its Creator; it was, therefore, simultaneously a “fallen” substance. Desiderii generally spoke of the body as a site of material functions, perceptions and impulses requiring strict regulation by the “higher” human faculties—the mind and heart. To these “spiritual” faculties, the body was naturally subordinated, and it functioned best when rigorously held under their discipline. If the body escaped its subordination, it could reverse the “natural” balance of the human psyche by dominating the very higher faculties meant by the Creator to control it. Desiderii worried that the subordination of the spiritual to the material had recently become a society-wide, even world-wide phenomenon: “Evidently, we are witness to that sad time about which our spiritual forebears, the desert fathers, and others . . . warned us. They said there will come a time when material things [veschestvennost’] will suppress the spiritual, earthly occupations will predominate and spiritual activity will recede into the background.” In such a time, Desiderii sadly noted, the practice of the Jesus prayer “would disappear without a trace.”\textsuperscript{56}

According to Desiderii, higher than the body was mind, a faculty whose function consisted in “reason” - that is, in gathering data from external and internal


\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Na gorakh Kavkaza}, p. 24.

sources, analyzing these data and considering their significance. The logical ordering of these data into categories Desiderii called “knowledge,” but he immediately added the distinction that this knowledge [znanie], like the reason [rassudok or razum] that generated it, was of two kinds: material and spiritual, the former coming from external substances and the body, the latter coming from the immaterial “inner” source of the soul and from God. Material knowledge was crucial to physical survival of the individual, but could be dangerous if it were in bondage to the “lower” world of the senses and to material things. Spiritual knowledge was of a higher order: it could be employed by the individual to achieve salvation. Nevertheless, spiritual knowledge could easily be misinterpreted, corrupted by an unwise liaison with the material. In Desiderii’s accounting, reason and knowledge of either type were “cold” concepts. He claimed: “They are incapable of fostering feelings or emotions—this last being the exclusive property of the heart’s energy.”

According to Desiderii, it was a mistake to equate the mind with the physical organ that processes thought, the brain. He considered the mind a faculty of the soul, albeit the least significant faculty compared to will [volia] and emotion or passion [chuvstvo]. Curiously for a religious psychologist, Desiderii had little to say about the human will. Indeed, he seemed to equate some of the will’s activities - judgment, drawing moral conclusions - with reason; meanwhile, he considered deliberate human action, whether moral or immoral in type, a resultant of the proper or improper interaction between reason and emotion. To Desiderii, the highest faculty of the soul was therefore emotion - or the heart: “This thing we call emotion is the heart, by which we enter into relationship with everything corporeal and spiritual that exists outside us. We notice immediately that this emotion

\footnote{Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 40. Desiderii misquoted Paul’s epistle to the Philippians to the effect that “a sharp, well-developed mind without a heart filled with love of truth . . . is a knife in a murderer’s hand.” Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 100. The citation to Philippians 4:8 was plainly a mistake played by a faulty memory. Perhaps Desiderii (Ilarion) was thinking of Paul’s first letter to Corinthians, which contrasts the false “wisdom” of the world with love-filled divine wisdom (Sophia).}
registers impressions from everything - from thoughts, desires and from the activity of our senses - sight, hearing - as well as from the inner operations of our spiritual powers. That is why it is called the root and center of our being: our entire life moves in this main point of our being.”

In its normal state, Desiderii contended, the heart is inclined to material things, to corruption and to shameful passions—that is to say, the heart like the body is “fallen.” In this fallen condition the heart cannot integrate our disparate parts into a harmonious whole, and without this integration we cannot achieve our full potential as human beings. To perform its integrative function, Desiderii claimed, the heart must be “renewed” by God: “the highest portion of our unseen nature, the spiritual, must be combined with the heart”—a combination that can only occur with prayer. And, here, raising again the subject of prayer, Desiderii returned to the transformative power of the name of God.

The elder acknowledged that there are many forms of prayer authorized by the Orthodox church. In principle, the Jesus prayer was no different from the others in that each, if prayed with the “requisite attention,” could bring the believer into “close proximity with God.” The problem with other prayers, as Desiderii reported, was that they paraded too many objects before the believer’s mind, making it difficult for the believer to concentrate on God: “the variety of subjects holds the believer’s attention so that the enemy has the opportunity to sow the believer’s mind with evil distractions.” On the other hand, the Jesus prayer directs our entire inner being toward Jesus Christ, thus giving us a much easier method of uniting ourselves with Him and giving the enemy no place to sow his evil seeds.”


58 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 95.


60 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 125.

61 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 125.
eight-word version to a three-word shorthand [“Gospodi Iisuse Khriste”] or even a one-word version [Iisuse].

By constantly repeating this talismanic divine name, Desiderii came personally into union with the divine light. He insisted that his experience could be replicated by other believers. “The name of Jesus Christ, so to speak, bears fruit [in one’s soul], the individual clearly feels God’s presence in our Lord’s divine name, feels it with the inmost fabric of the soul. The feeling of the Lord’s presence and of His name conflate into an identity, after which it becomes impossible to distinguish the one from the other.” Only after the believer had experienced subjectively this unity of divine presence and the divine name, “could he then witness to the entire world that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is Jesus Himself, the Lord God; that the name is inseparable from His Most Holy Being, that it is identical with that Being, making this assertion not on the basis of reason but on the basis of his heart’s feeling, a heart penetrated by the Lord’s spirit.”

At the end of his “conversation” with Desiderii, Ilarion offered the reader a summary of the dying elder’s last words - a summary he clearly meant to constitute a spiritual “testament” on the order of the monk Zosima’s teachings in Dostoevskii’s *Brothers Karamazov*. According to Desiderii, “the path of inner, spiritual life on which one may attain God consists of properly-directed movement in two directions: first, toward oneself; and then, away from oneself toward God.” The first movement amounted to personal recognition of one’s sinfulness and corruption, of one’s “complete inability to do good, and of one’s constant inclination toward evil,” of one’s “utter helplessness to effect salvation.” This recognition, the elder promised, would make the believer realize the “absolute necessity of God’s help.” The realization of one’s helpless dependence on God, Desiderii contended, is “more valuable than any other kind of knowledge for it opens inside us a door to the acceptance of that [divine] assistance without which

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63 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, p. 13.
our salvation cannot occur.” The second movement - from oneself to God - takes place, Desiderii said, in active prayer.\(^{64}\)

Before analyzing Ilarion’s teaching on the Jesus prayer, we should touch on certain themes in the remainder of the text. Previous commentaries on Na gorakh Kavkaza confine themselves to the book’s first two hundred pages on the Jesus prayer and its significance. They disregard the second part (Ilarion’s personal meditation on the gospels) and the third part (a selection of his spiritual correspondence) as uninteresting or irrelevant to the controversy over namepraising.\(^{65}\) Although there is little of fundamental theological importance in the two closing sections of Na gorakh Kavkaza, Ilarion nevertheless raised three subjects of interest to his monastic audience and therefore having an least an indirect claim on the attention of historians.

First, in his personal retelling of the gospel narrative Ilarion focused on the blindness of those Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. He followed the eleventh chapter in the Gospel according to John, which reported the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the refusal of Jewish religious authorities to accept this ‘sign” as evidence of Jesus’ divinity. In commenting on the incident, Ilarion wrote:

> From this one can see that never has human nature found itself in such darkness of moral corruption as the Jewish people during the earthly life of the Savior. This Jewish disbelief in divine power – a power that manifested itself in miraculous fashion before their eyes and that they consciously, stubbornly and maliciously denied – is a Satanic deed. It reveals a heart full of evil and dishonesty, and utterly incapable of repentance or of movement toward grace.

\(^{64}\) Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 193.

\(^{65}\) Bolshakov’s Russian Mystics ignored the second and third parts as unconnected to the theme of mysticism. A. F. Losev thought the gospel narrative interesting. See a brief outline of his response to Ilarion in “O knige ‘Na gorakh Kavkaza’,” Nachala Nos. 1 – 4, 1995, pp. 236 – 240. Most recently, Ilarion (Alfeev) left out of his extended analysis “the entire second part of [Skhimonakh Ilarion’s] book and the author’s excursus on anthropology and psychology” on the ground that “they leave no direct relationship to the theme that interests us.” Sviashchennaia taina tserkvi. Tom pervyi, pp. 301 – 302.
That is how the Jewish tribe [rod Evreiskii] perished – that remarkable tribe chosen by God.

It has been rightly said that there is no more detestable or more appalling self-delusion than that which disguises falsehood and obstinacy under cover of religious sanctimony.66

This passage, with its themes of Jewish blindness and malice, was unfortunately not untypical of anti-Judaic sentiment in the Orthodox church. Nor was Ilarion’s equation of unbelief with blindness anything new: witness Dostoevskii’s use of the Lazarus tale in *Crime and Punishment*. What surely struck Ilarion’s readers as unusual was the concluding sentence concerning the appalling “self-delusion” of religious sanctimony disguising falsehood and obstinacy. Ilarion seemed to intimate that religious opponents of the Jesus prayer were blind, self-deluded unbelievers who hid their moral corruption behind a veil of ostentatious external holiness. He hinted that Christians who opposed the Jesus prayer were like “Satanic Jews.” This passage in *Na gorakh Kavkaza* may help explain the anti-Semitic epithets hurled by Ilarion’s followers against his Christian detractors in 1913 on Mount Athos.

Second, in the book’s final section Ilarion reproached monks on Mount Athos for seeking detailed news of the Russo-Japanese war and of other events.

You read newspapers and are distracted by military matters in the Far East. But one does not see anything of the sort among the church fathers, that they followed the affairs of this world. For that purpose God established the military and civil authorities. But we [monks] are meddling in an alien sphere beyond our jurisdiction, we are harming ourselves and our spiritual cause when we fill our minds with the irrepressible urgency of [military] strategies, our hearts with anxiety and trouble, for these things serve as a great obstacle to inner prayer. And of what use to us is knowledge of the war’s course? It is enough to know that a war is underway, and that we must pray to Almighty God to save the Russian land, to lift up our country in which for centuries his holy name has been confessed.67

Here Ilarion delivered to his spiritual followers a mixed message. On the one hand, consistent with his desire to avoid distractions from inner prayer, he

66 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, pp. 207 – 208.

67 *Na gorakh Kavkaza*, p. 304.
invited monks to turn away from their worldly preoccupations. On the other hand, he acknowledged the appropriateness of knowing that war was underway and of expressing patriotic sentiments about Russia. By licensing even this degree of knowledge of worldly events and by advocating prayer for the Christian empire’s political-religious well-being, Ilarion risked admitting through the back door what he had driven out the front. The inconsistency of his position, scarcely noticed before publication of Na gorakh Kavkaza, would assume significance in 1913 when Athonite monks confronted Russian military and secular authorities over praising Jesus’ name. Under changed circumstances, a knowledge of political currents in St. Petersburg and elsewhere would be thought absolutely necessary among Ilarion’s sympathizers on Mount Athos, even as they claimed to be simply monks anxious to avoid worldly interference.

Third, at the very end of Na gorakh Kavkaza, Ilarion answered those brothers who accused him of substituting the Jesus prayer for sacred liturgy, the performance of monastic prayers, the reading of the gospels and other Christian duties. “My adversaries [protivniki] say about me, in an effort to diminish the attractiveness of [their] enemy [vraga] and to reduce the zeal of practitioners of the Jesus prayer, that he [that is, I] talks only about inner prayer, he is silent about all the other [Christian] virtues, but we need more than prayer alone. But I answer them: prayers is the mother of all virtues.” Ilarion’s comment indicated that even before publication of his book he had been criticized by those who feared an overemphasis on the Jesus prayer would undermine the monastic commitment to a variety of prayers, the regular reading of the gospels, attendance at liturgy and the like. What was revelatory in Ilarion’s account of the disagreement was not the criticism as such, for every practitioner of inner prayer must contemplate the balance between concentration on solitary prayer and performance of other Christian duties. Rather the remark was startling because it classified his anxious critics as “adversaries” who thought of him as the “enemy.” By this comment Ilarion encouraged fellow practitioners of the Jesus prayer to regard their critics as

68 Na gorakh Kavkaza, p. 315.
members of another spiritual camp, as diabolical foes. For who other than Jesus’ sworn enemy Satan had a stake in “diminishing the zeal of practitioners of the Jesus prayer”? Ilarion’s rhetoric in *Na gorakh Kavkaza* opened the way for his “zealous” followers’ rhetorical excesses six years later.

Let us now analyze the first section of Ilarion’s *Na gorakh Kavkaza* -- the portion on the Jesus prayer -- from two perspectives: first, its place in the history of mysticism generally and of Orthodox Christian mysticism in particular; and second, its theological implications.

*Na gorakh Kavkaza* contained many of the characteristic features of the mystical outlook described by the German theologian Rudolf Otto in his classical study, *Das Heilige*. Otto noted that mysticism begins with the mystic’s “feeling of nothingness in contrast to what is supreme above all creatures.” This so-called “creature consciousness” or “creature feeling” expressed itself in Ilarion’s humble meditation on the infinite power of the Creator who made the Caucasus night sky; it also emerged in Desiderii’s “testament” where he acknowledged that the way to God involves recognizing one’s sinfulness and impotence compared to God. Otto also pointed out that mysticism entails the realization that in the object of veneration there inheres a “numinous power” of holiness—a power that induces in the mystic a feeling of “awe” or “dread,” a sense of being “overpowered” by sovereign majesty, and a perception that the numinous power communicates to the world a mysterious “energy,” “force” or “movement.” Otto noted that the mystic will be dumbstruck by the presence of the numinous “other” but will also be “fascinated” by the presence and drawn toward or into it. In *Na gorakh Kavkaza* Ilarion portrayed God precisely as a numinous force, a dread majesty whose name, before Jesus’ coming, believers dared not pronounce. On the other hand, in Jesus this “dread majesty” found an attractive incarnation to which Ilarion and all other Christians were drawn.

According to Otto, the mystic prepares for union with the numinous object of veneration by an elaborate process of “self-emptying.” The union itself is
effected through what Otto called “various transactions - at once magical and devotional in character - by formula, ordination, adjuration, consecration, exorcism and the like.”69 In Na gorakh Kavkaza, the elder Desiderii emptied his mind of all distractions so as so make it “utterly blank” before entering the realm of the heart. The Jesus prayer was the recitative “formula” Desiderii used to bring about that self-emptying. Repetition of the prayer was also the “transaction” necessary for Desiderii to enter Jesus’ mystical presence in the realm of the heart.

The main point of the mysticism, of course, is to achieve oneness with the holy object of veneration. As William James put it in The Varieties of Religious Experience: “The overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.” Generally speaking, according to James’ investigation, fusion with the Absolute means the annihilation of individual identity. He quoted the Upanishads and the Sufi master Gulshan-Râz to prove this point that in the Absolute “the me, the we, the thou cannot be found, for in the One there can be no distinction.”70 In Ilarion’s Na gorakh Kavkaza, of course, the starets Desiderii merged his heart with Jesus. What is interesting, even highly unusual about Desiderii’s experience of oneness, is his insistence that his union with Jesus was complete, yet did not obliterate his identity or freedom. In his respect, Ilarion’s Na gorakh Kavkaza distinguished itself from the varieties of mysticism analyzed by William James. Perhaps the militant solitariness of the hesychast in the wilderness brought about such a strong sense of the self in Ilarion and his alter ego Desiderii that that self would not be dissolved in the divine presence. More likely, Ilarion and Desiderii thought of mystical union with Jesus in the template made by earlier Orthodox mystics - namely, the individual mystic


being suffused by the “uncreated light” of the transfigured Jesus on Mount Tabor. That template was firmly in place after Gregory Palamas developed his ideas on the uncreated energies of God in the fourteenth century, and it would have been very familiar to Ilarion and Desiderii from viewing icons of the Transfiguration [preobrazhenie] showing the stunned apostles, still recognizable as individuals, tumbling in confusion before Jesus’ radiant energy.

In its elaborate discussion of the Jesus prayer Ilarion’s Na gorakh Kavkaza fits squarely into the Orthodox tradition of mystical practice. John Meyendorff has pointed out that this tradition stretches back, on the one hand, to the fourth-century master Evagrius Ponticus, the “first great teacher” of interior prayer who conveyed his methods of silent meditation to the Egyptian desert monks, and, on the other hand, to the anonymous master known as Pseudo-Macarius, who passed his idea of the “prayer of the heart” to St. Gregory of Nyssa.71 Meyendorff argued that all writers on the history of hesychasm “can be roughly classified as disciples of Evagrius or [Pseudo-]Macarius, provided, of course, that that classification is not applied too strictly and, especially, too much stress is not put on the terminology which tends to get the two schools confused. . . .” For Meyendorff, Evagrius was a Platonist who saw human beings as “intelligence” or “mind” trapped in matter and who advocated interior prayer as a means to liberate this mind from its corrupt material fetters; Pseudo-Macarius, on the other hand, thought of human beings as “psycho-physiological wholes,” as possessing body, mind but also heart, and he advocated the “prayer of the heart” as a method of bringing the entire human being into communion with the Incarnated Jesus.72 In terms of Meyendorff’s distinction, Ilarion was much closer to Pseudo-Macarius than to Evagrius, for there is nothing in Na gorakh Kavkaza to suggest the author’s allegiance to Platonism or to any view of human nature that prizes intelligence over all other faculties.


Ilarion had a wide knowledge of the techniques of interior prayer practiced by Orthodox masters since the fourth century: Mount Athos itself was a living repository of knowledge on the subject, and the Philokalia contained the best writings on the topic. In a general way, all the techniques of prayer resembled one another: the practitioner was to seek out a master to impose spiritual discipline and supervise the various steps of the prayer; the practitioner was to concentrate the mind on Jesus and to avoid distractions of any sort; the prayer was to be said “continuously” with the cycle of repetitions to be broken only when the practitioner found his attention wandering; the practitioner was asked physically to direct attention to the heart by directing his gaze downward toward the heart; in some cases, the practitioner was to say the words of the prayer in a rhythm corresponding with regular breathing or the beating of the heart; occasionally, the practitioner was asked to listen for the rhythms of Jesus’ breathing with him; in all cases, the practitioner was to strive to make contact with Jesus, to achieve fusion or merger with Him.

In elaborating these techniques of prayer, however, the Orthodox masters sometimes emphasized one element of practice over another or made distinctions about the settings of prayer practice. Thus, for example, the eleventh-century mystic St. Simeon the New Theologian warned categorically against performing interior prayer while standing because he worried that such a posture would lead the practitioner to the sin of pride. He also criticized anyone who would attempt silent interior prayer without a master exercising direct supervision. Hence St. Simeon recommended that prayer be performed only in the context of a cenobitic monastic community, not by solitary hermits in the wilderness. Gregory of Palamas,

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however, thought of interior prayer as a practice appropriate precisely to monks in solitude, or rather in the near solitude of isolated kellions on the outskirts of Athos - a venue in which he had lived himself. Palamas endorsed the Jesus prayer as an activity involving the entire individual, with all faculties - body, mind and heart - fully engaged. He had no patience for those who imagined the Jesus prayer in terms of discrete physical, mental and emotional processes. Nor did he greatly concern himself with mechanical synchronization of the prayer with breathing: he did not like the implication that prayer is a “mechanical way of obtaining grace.” Palamas did write about three “stages” or “degrees” of prayer, but he was more interested in these stages as effects of prayer than he was in their mechanical description. For him disciplined prayer led to “detachment” from material things, then to “joy” or “ecstasy,” and finally to “union” with Jesus.

Unlike Saint Simeon but like Palamas, Ilarion endorsed the prayer of the heart as appropriate to monks in eremitic isolation. Like Palamas, Ilarion did not concern himself with synchronizing prayer and breathing. Again like Palamas, Ilarion sharply rejected the notion of prayer as a mechanism for obtaining grace; as we have seen, for Ilarion the words of the Jesus prayer, not the sinner’s work in performing them, brought grace to the prayerful practitioner. Finally, like Palamas, Ilarion emphasized detachment from the material as a prelude to merging with the divine, but, unlike Palamas, Ilarion identified union with Jesus as the supreme moment of spiritual fulfillment or joy. In Ilarion’s book there is little talk of “ecstasy” with its repressed erotic connotations. After reading Na gorakh Kavkaza, one has an impression of Ilarion as a true master of the Jesus prayer who had absorbed the Orthodox tradition of writing on interior prayer, had made it his own and had expressed its arcane secrets for his twentieth-century contemporaries.

“neither the term ‘Jesus prayer’ nor the text of that prayer centered on the name of Jesus, can be found anywhere in the authentic writings of Simeon. Ibid., p. 89.

If Ilarion’s *Na gorakh Kavkaza* fit easily into the literature of Christian mysticism, how could it have fallen under theological suspicion? How could a self-consciously Orthodox primer on interior prayer have been attacked as “heretical”? Before answering these questions directly, let us recall that, in the history of Orthodox Christianity, the writing and teaching of mystics have occasioned considerable controversy, including attributions of heresy. In fact, the two greatest progenitors of interior prayer fell under dogmatic suspicion: Evagrius was declared a heretic for endorsing Origen’s erroneous teachings, while Pseudo-Macarius has been accused posthumously of membership in the heretical Messalian sect and of allegiance to Pelagianism. For that matter, John Meyendorff has argued that Macarius’ greatest disciple, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and his entire school might be reproached for “semi-Pelagianism” - that is, for taking too seriously the freedom of the will relative to divine grace.\(^75\) In the above cases, the imputation of dogmatic error did not hinge directly on the practice of interior prayer by the religious thinkers in question, yet it was surely true that their advocacy of interior prayer was intimately linked to their “dubious” theologies. In the eleventh century, St. Simeon the New Theologian was attacked for allegedly perpetrating heresy concerning the Orthodox doctrine on the Trinity.

However, an authoritative study by Archbishop Basile Krivochéine has suggested that Simeon’s ideas on the Trinity were only a pretext used by his opponents to act against him, the real ground of their opposition being his imposition of rigorous monastic discipline, including the regular practice of interior prayer at St. Mamas Monastery and his broad-ranging critique of spiritual corruption in Byzantium.\(^76\) In the fourteenth century, the dogmatic implication of the Jesus prayer was a major factor in the heresy accusations against Gregory Palamas. Behind these historical conjunctures of mysticism and heresy accusations was more than coincidence: the Orthodox Church invested such great significance.


\(^{76}\) See Basile Krivochéine, *Dans la lumière du Christ*, pp. 43 - 63.
in monastic life, in continual prayer and in mystical access to God that its appointed authority figures naturally scrutinized the activities of those monks who claimed expertise in the practice of interior prayer. For the Orthodox, prayer was not a trivial formula mechanically intoned by a dutiful believer, but a supernaturally “charged” moment when an ardent soul encounters God by pronouncing a set of words bristling with dogmatic assertion. To use Ilarion’s words, prayer is a “weighty matter.”

Ilarion would have been horrified by the thought that, in writing \textit{Na gorakh Kavkaza}, he was making innovative theological claims. He wrote as a loyal son of the Orthodox church, for the sake of Orthodox monks who had offered their lives to follow righteousness, and he had addressed the most traditional topic concerning divine worship - namely, prayer. Nevertheless, here and there Ilarion’s book proved jarring to some of his readers. Let us identify certain troubling elements of the text.

Ilarion saw all of creation, except human beings, as perfectly subordinate to God, as expressing God’s will because fully inhabited by God. He considered most human beings to be “rebels” against their Creator, sinners distracted from God by worldly cares. He thought very few of these human beings would be saved, for few prayed the Jesus prayer or any other prayer with the “requisite attention.” Those who fully submitted to God’s will would be saved, not by their works but by divine power inhering in the charged words of the Jesus prayer. These propositions surely seemed to Ilarion to represent authentic Orthodox teaching on the goodness of creation, the fallenness of human beings, and the saving power of prayer. To certain members of Ilarion’s reading public, however, his words could be construed differently. It was one thing to describe created things as good or even to claim their perfect subordination to God, but another to say that God inhabits them. The assertion of God’s presence in material things verged on pantheism - one of the charges later leveled against Ilarion and his followers by two Ecumenical Patriarchs and by the Russian Holy Synod. Ilarion’s view of justification seemed almost crudely Augustinian or “Protestant,” the Orthodox generally taking the view that

32
salvation could be attained by all believers, at least in principle. The idea of prayer’s saving power was nothing new, but the weight Ilarion attached to the invocation of Jesus name was unusual, though not unprecedented in Orthodox literature. Ilarion wrote that, from the subjective perspective of a practiced ascetic, the “name of the Lord Jesus Christ is Jesus himself, the Lord God.” But was this not another instance of “pantheism,” or worse? To say that the name Jesus addresses or invokes the Son of God was one thing, but to assert that the name is God seemed blasphemous to Ilarion’s most critical readers.

Ilarion’s attitude toward the church was another stumbling block for certain readers. At various points in Na gorakh Karkaza Ilarion put the Jesus prayer in the larger context of Christian religious practice. He said explicitly that practice of interior prayer is the “highest” Christian virtue, but not the only one. He said the Jesus prayer rests on “four pillars”: the cultivation of true humility; love for our neighbors “without exception”; purity; and repentance of sin. He described practitioners of the Jesus prayer as “unusual” men given to the solitary life: he did not pretend to write a book for other Christians who constituted the numerical majority in the Orthodox church. Yet Ilarion was so singleminded in his account of the Jesus prayer that he seemed sometimes to be claiming that only its practitioners would be saved. He implied that, in an age of materialism, the Christian church consisted of Desiderii, himself and a handful of other ascetics. Indeed, a reader might have garnered the impression that for Ilarion the only men with spiritual authority were those who had “prayed continuously”: the church fathers, the mystics whose words could be found in the Philokalia, and their Russian disciples - Paisy Velichkovskii, Seraphim of Sarov, Ignatii Branchanninov, and John of Kronstadt.

Ilarion’s disregard of the institutional church was bound to disturb the clerical powers-that-be, who looked to properly-ordained vicars of Christ as the guardians of the Orthodox world. Ilarion’s emphasis on spiritual authority of the unappointed elders, the startsy, hit on a neuralgic point for the official church. As the great church historian Igor Smolitch has noted, the “office” of starets emerged
not from above, by decision of Ecumenical Patriarch or Synod, but “spontaneously,” “from below,” and in Russia it operated “without influence from above.”

For most of the nineteenth century, the Russian startsy had done nothing to disconcert the Holy Synod - quite the contrary, the elders had bolstered the sagging discipline of Russian monks and had worked collaboratively with the bishops. Ilarion’s book threatened to disrupt that serene picture by its implied rejection of institutional authority. For Ilarion, the only thing that seemingly mattered was the name of God.

It has been said that the impulse behind most material heresies is the urge radically to simplify Christian doctrine. Was Ilarion, with his obsessive commitment to interior prayer and the power of the divine name, such a terrible simplifier? Was his “heretical” simplification of Christian teaching dangerous to Orthodoxy because rooted in the exalted spiritual world of the Holy Mountain and in the virtually unregulated, and therefore uncontrollable “office” of spiritual elder? Or was Ilarion nothing more than he advertised himself to be - a simple Orthodox monk who, after a lifetime of interior prayer, desperately wanted to share the fruits of his spiritual labors with other monks. In this instance, the evidence was read both ways: Ilarion’s critics seized on his “oversimplification” of Christian doctrine, on theologically “ambiguous” passages in Na gorakh Kavkaza, on the dangers presented by an uncontrolled Athonite monk; meanwhile, his sympathizers saw Ilarion as a moral hero [podvizhnik] whose feats of ascetic discipline deserved praise rather than censure, and as an inspiring writer on prayer whose simple book could not be imagined outside the ambit of Orthodoxy. Almost immediately, the disagreement over Ilarion’s “simple gifts” led to one of the most complicated, scandalous and nasty religious struggles in Russian imperial history.

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