

Holy Men and Modern Minds: How Hesychast Spirituality Transforms During the Monastic Transition

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“In monastic life, you can achieve either an angel-like or a demon-like life, with no limits in either direction.”¹

Abstract: Viktor Frankl views self-transcendence as a key objective in developing into a fully realised human being. Hesychastic spirituality in Orthodox monasticism has a similar aim. During the transition from the secular to monastic life, monks go through radical self-transformation from the egoic to Edenic state. In that setting, self-transcendence becomes the ultimate aim of deification and a coping mechanism to deal with the suffering experiences often accompanying monastic spiritual development. I consider four elements of Hesychast spirituality: nostalgia, metanoia, Jesus Prayer, and spiritual fatherhood, to be forming elements of spiritual transformation based on the real-life experiences of Athonite hermits. Through qualitative interviews with four participants and thematic phenomenological analysis, I focus on psychological transformation processes that have been only partially addressed in previous research.

Keywords: Hesychast spirituality; self-transcendence; spiritual transformation; the transition phase

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Introduction

At 5 a.m., Fr. Silouan, a middle-aged hermit on Mount Athos,² woke up after only two hours of sleep. That night, he prayed by the sea, under stars and moonlit waves, forgetting his family for a while, but with sunrise, nostalgia returned – first in a dream of the past, then in his usual neurosis. As always, there was no breakfast, no shower, only a return to his daily prayer routine. The sun had risen, and birds were singing, but his heart remained heavy. In

¹ Fr. A, personal communications, April 3, 2024.

² Mount Athos is an isolated Northern Greece peninsula hosting 20 monasteries and numerous hermitages.

church, he read the Psalms with a distracted mind until confession brought him quiet relief. During the Divine Liturgy, he felt suddenly lifted by divine grace, ready to begin a new day, showered in God's warmth, and called back into the silence of his vocation.

This emotional highs and lows of monastic life mark a trajectory toward self-transcendence.³ Fr. Siouan's story captures the contrasts of monastic life: profound spiritual struggle with one's nature and consolation through spiritual practice. The adversary of this life is not an undesirable side effect but a part of a transformative function. The tension between affliction and consolation exemplifies how suffering becomes a source of growth in Orthodox Christian spirituality when embraced with humility and prayer. This mirrors the teachings of St. Silouan the Athonite, who insists that suffering, when approached rightly, leads to divine grace.⁴

Monastic life, defined by extended hours of prayer, minimal sleep, and rigorous spiritual labour, seeks to renounce a past centred on worldly pleasures and sin, cultivating an angelic life of virtues and asceticism amid intense loneliness and temptations. Monks endure cold nights and hot days, often with little rest, engaging in nearly a hundred hours of prayer and work each week. There is no financial reward, no remote job, no modern entertainment. This life stands in sharp contrast to today's culture grounded in self-actualisation and comfort.

The difficulties of monastic life are so high that many who arrive at Mount Athos give up and leave the monasteries.⁵ In the meantime, by assigning specific meaning to these adverse experiences, individuals can cultivate a deeper sense of spiritual well-being.⁶ Moreover, monastic life does not provide immediate comfort or the quick balance that modern culture often seeks; instead, it demands long-term daily titanic struggles with its own nature. However, despite these challenges, Mount Athos attracts many who seek to experience an exotic monastic life, as something radically different from

3 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature; Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1902).

4 Sofronij Sacharov, *Saint Silouan, the Athonite* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999).

5 An intriguing area of future research might explore the factors contributing to individuals' decisions to leave or stay within the monastery.

6 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

a “worldly successful life”.⁷ This raises difficult questions: Does monasticism provide a sufficient existential answer – or is it merely the blind passion of religious zealots?

From a theological perspective, the Orthodox monastic path, rooted in hesychast spirituality, aims to imitate Christ as closely as possible. This journey is directed toward theosis, or deification, which signifies achieving a likeness to God and evokes hope for eternal life in beatitude – the highest stage of self-transcendence. However, this motivation might not be reasonable for non-Christians or non-religious individuals, and the nuances of hesychast spirituality may not be easy for the general reader to understand. Therefore, to a broader audience, I use the lens of self-transcendence, as regardless of sociocultural and religious contexts, the desire for self-transcendence remains a fundamental contradiction within human nature.⁸

Viktor Frankl, a pioneer of existential psychology, views self-transcendence as a hallmark of spirituality and a key objective in developing into a fully realised human.⁹ To reach self-transcendence, individuals search for meaning beyond self-interest, often by embracing suffering and engaging in spiritual struggle. Therefore, from a self-transcendent lens, the Orthodox monastic path represents an existential search beyond self-interests. It is oriented towards self-transcendence through lengthy, consistent efforts to overcome weaknesses while cultivating a virtuous life and spiritual well-being.

Moreover, hesychasm itself contains an implicit threefold structure (purification, contemplation and perfection) that systematically organises the elusive process of self-transcendence. Theoretical works on the topic are numerous, but to understand the living reality of this tradition, I turned to the voices of those within it. I interviewed contemporary practitioners to explore how they interpret and apply classical hesychastic teachings in their lives. I intentionally set aside most theological elaboration and instead focused on monastic practice articulated by monks at various stages of transformation.

7 For example, in 2019, the number of pilgrims to Mount Athos reached 250,000, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/mount-athos-more-than-250000-pilgrims-a-year/>. However, starting in 2023, the entrance to Mount Athos is limited to 100 Orthodox and 10 non-Orthodox visitors daily.

8 Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, “Rediscovering the later version of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification,” *Review of general psychology* 10.4 (2006), 302–317.

9 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Hypothesis

Against this background, I argue that hesychasm, in the context of Orthodox monastic spirituality, represents both a theologically justified and psychologically effective strategy for existential search and meaning through radical self-transformation and regular pursuit of self-transcendence. More specifically, I consider the process of self-transformation in hesychasm as a complex matrix with supernatural, psychological, and social factors, using a threefold structure of calling, transition, and perfection. Simply put, I want to understand how individuals enter monastic life, change within monastic settings, and what they could get in higher spiritual stages. Using a self-transcendence framework, the study seeks to answer:

1. What motivates believers to enter the monastery?
2. How does the transition from a secular to a monastic life happen?
3. What are the long-term effects and spiritual benefits of the perfection stage?

To support my arguments, I analyse the real-life experiences of Athonite hermitic monks through qualitative interviews with four participants. Using a thematic phenomenological analysis, I focus on the psychological dimensions of self-transformation processes that have only been partially addressed in the past. This study addresses two key gaps in the existing literature. First, it provides original empirical insights into the Hesychastic hermitic community on Mount Athos¹⁰ – an underexplored group in ethnographic and psychological research. While Paganopoulos (2012, 2020)¹¹ offers important sociological and anthropological analyses of Athonite monasticism; his focus on coenobitic communities leaves the inner psychological and spiritual dynamics of hermits largely unexamined.¹² Moreover, his study did not broadly apply a psychological perspective.

10 Hermits and coenobitic are two major types of monastic life organisation. First type assumes separate living and praying, while the second type is a monastic life with the community.

11 Michelangelo Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary: An Ethnography of Monastic Life on Mount Athos* (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2010).

12 Michelangelo Paganopoulos, "Being and Becoming a Monk on Mount Athos: An Ontological Approach to Relational Monastic Personhood in the 'Garden of the Virgin Mary' as a Rite of Passage," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020), 66–87.

Second, the study applies the psychological lens of self-transcendence to the study of Hesychasm. Although emerging research (e.g., Cattoi, 2024)¹³ has begun to explore the intersections between Hesychastic practice and altered states of consciousness, systematic investigations into self-transcendence within this tradition remain blurry. In contrast to artificially induced self-transcendent experiences, such as those prompted by psychedelics, virtual reality, or neurostimulation,¹⁴ Hesychasm represents a sustained, natural method of evoking self-transcendence in daily life. By examining the psychological transformation of Athonite hermits, this study contributes to both monastic studies and the growing literature on self-transcendence as a pathway to personal and spiritual development that might find application in everyday life.

Hesychast Spirituality

Hesychasm is a method to obtain God's likeness. This mystical tradition within Orthodox Christianity emphasises inner silence and contemplative prayer and is considered the 'golden standard' of Orthodox ascetic and spiritual life. However, Hesychasm is a spiritual practice not limited to a specific methodology or certain instruments for spiritual progress. In the monastic context, it requires total commitment and encompasses all facets of life. It is more than a theological trend or an ecclesiastical system; hesychastic spirituality is a complete renewal of perception and an interpretation of the events and priorities of life. In Foucault's terms, it is a distinctive perspective that enables us to move from one reality (earthly, fleshly) to another (heavenly, spiritual).¹⁵

This movement towards a new reality and the transformation of self from the perspective of human agency is actualised through ascetic practices of the body and mind, individual and communal prayer, contemplation, and Church sacraments. It is assumed that by continuously eliminating vices and cultivating virtues in their advanced stages, practitioners can cultivate remarkable psychological qualities and develop a new way of being what

13 Thomas Cattoi, "Hesychasm and Psychedelics: Altered States, Purgation, and the Question of Authentic Mysticism," *Journal of Contemplative Studies*, Special Issue 1: Psychedelics, Contemplation, and Religion (2024), 33–51.

14 David Bryce Yaden et al., "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2017), 143–160.

15 Michel Foucault, "Speaking the Truth about Oneself," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

they understand as deification or theosis.¹⁶ According to St. Gregory, the Theologian, man is a “living being [...] who, in the process of theosis, through the inclination towards God.”¹⁷

In Hesychasm, theosis is understood as a lifelong inner transformation in which the human person is gradually elevated from being in the “image of God” to achieving “likeness to God” – not through external moral acts, but through a personal union with the Creator.¹⁸ This process involves the progressive refinement of human consciousness – thought, emotion, will, perception, and imagination – through a synergy (Greek: *synergia*) between divine grace and human effort. The dynamic process of theosis is unique to each individual; no one is deified in precisely the same way.¹⁹

The classical vision of Orthodox anthropology frames the path to theosis within a three-stage structure: calling, transition, and perfection. This framework, rooted in early ascetic writings – Evagrius Ponticus (*praktike, physike, theologike*), St. Maximus the Confessor (purification, contemplation, perfection), and John Climacus’s *Ladder* – was further developed by Torrance (2012), who interpreted it as a progression through initial, existential, and vicarious repentance.²⁰ Also, this tripartite model of transformation is echoed in Thomas Merton’s theory of the true and false self (1949, 1961)²¹ and finds parallels in modern psychological theories, particularly Jungian individuation, offering a conceptual bridge between theological and psychological understandings of self-transcendence.²²

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

17 Archimandrite George Kapsanis, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life*, 2nd ed. (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios, 2023), 14.

18 Ibid.

19 Brother Theophan Miskovic, “Theosis in the Light of Modern Brain and Mind Sciences.” Paper presented at *Ascetic Practices and the Mind: Mental Healing in Eastern Christianity*, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., March 1–2, 2024.

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

21 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

22 Viktor Niachayeu, *The Prayer of the Heart as a Way to Find a True Self: Based on Thomas Merton’s Writings* (Master diss., Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen, 2021); Byron J. Gaist, Viktor Niachayeu, “Psychological and Theological Approaches to Self-Transcendence: A Comparison Between Eastern Orthodox Hesychastic Spirituality and Jungian Active Imagination,” *Quadrant* 25, no. 2 (2023), 95–105.

Self-transcendence

I use self-transcendence (ST) as a key concept in understanding the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the Hesychast tradition. ST occurs when individuals aim to move beyond self-centred desires and beliefs that connect with higher purposes such as God, love, the Divine and others. Then more we focus on others or commit ourselves to a greater purpose, the more we can flourish.²³ Contemporary scholars in the psychology of consciousness have defined ST as a crucial milestone in psycho-spiritual growth, representing advanced stages of human maturity.²⁴ In the seven-factor model of temperament and character, Cloninger et al. (1993) introduced ST as a measurable personality trait, showing how deeply individuals perceive themselves as an integral part of the larger universe.²⁵ Levenson et al. (2005) framed ST as a central aspect of wisdom linked to the ageing process and lifelong development. Later, researchers defined ST using two main characteristics – the “annihilation component” and “relational component”.²⁶ The first component promotes reduced self-salience and is complemented by the term “hypo-egoic state”. This term describes a psychological condition characterised by minimal or reduced self-focus, which can advance optimal functioning in individuals.²⁷ The central aim of Hesychast spirituality is closely linked to the hypo-egoic state, as monastic tonsure symbolises the death of the self, the mortal worldly self, while cultivating the Divine image. The second characteristic of ST emphasises connections to others and relationships beyond oneself, as a raindrop becomes part of the ocean, which for hesychasm represents gaining unity with God and cultivating advanced empathy for people around. These two components of ST are interconnected.²⁸ The Hesychast tradition resonates with both components,

23 Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being,” in *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna*, vol. 1 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

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

25 C. Robert Cloninger, Sarah Svrakic, and Theodore Pryzbeck, “A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 50, no. 12 (1993), 975–990.

26 Yaden et al., “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience,” 150.

27 Mark R. Leary, Jennifer Guadagno, “The Role of Hypo-Egoic Self-Processes in Optimal Functioning and Subjective Well-Being,” in *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135–146.

28 Yaden et al., “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience,” 150.

demonstrating the self-transcendence theory's applicability in psychological and theological contexts.

Transcendent experience (TE) can have a profound impact on our lives. Depending on their duration and intensity, we often remember these moments for a lifetime and strive to attain them again. Newberg and Waldman (2016) term high-intensity states of transcendence as moments of “big Enlightenment”,²⁹ while monastic spirituality refers to these transcendent experiences as “the prayer of the heart”, the spiritual level when prayer occurs in the mind automatically. Such TE allow us to reach the peak of emotional and cognitive states and affect what Foucault frames with the transformation of reality³⁰ via derivation of neuropsychological settings. For instance, Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) point out that short-term effects can include perceptual alterations³¹, what frames the phenomenon of spiritual senses.³²

However, the actual value of TE is in its long-term transformative effects. As a psychological state or personality trait, TE booster self-development can lead to changes in life values, orientation, and worldview.³³ Moreover, ST and TE are crucial for understanding how humans can cope and flourish amidst suffering and adversity, as ST involves a fundamental shift in life attitude from an egotistic focus to a broader, other greater than oneself,³⁴ the attention to the personal negative experience is reduced. Thus, the TE analysed earlier by philosophy (e.g., Foucault, 1997)³⁵ and from theological perspectives (e.g., Otto, 1957)³⁶ with modern ST lenses becoming tangible.

29 Andrew Newberg, Mark Robert Waldman, *How Enlightenment Changes Your Brain: The New Science of Transformation* (New York: Avery, 2016).

30 Foucault, “Speaking the Truth about Oneself.”

31 Albert Garcia-Romeu, Samuel P. Himmelstein, Jacob Kaminker, “Self-Transcendent Experience: A Grounded Theory Study,” *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 5 (2015), 633–654.

32 Gunnar Gjermundsen, “The Spiritual Senses and the Problem of Transcendence,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 23.2 (2023), 295–315.

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

34 Piers Worth, Matthew D. Smith, “Clearing the Pathways to Self-Transcendence,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021).

35 Foucault, “Speaking the Truth about Oneself.”

36 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Overall, Hesychast spirituality cultivates ST, functioning as a coping mechanism³⁷, a developmental process,³⁸ an aspect of personality,³⁹ a core value, a component of worldview,⁴⁰ and a motivational element.⁴¹ ST in hesychasm may manifest as awe (the awareness of God's greatness and one's insignificance), flow (experienced during concentrated prayer), and mystical experience, which, though not the ultimate goal, may accompany spiritual practices.⁴² Therefore, exploring ST within the Hesychast context helps to understand how spiritual practices can facilitate profound psychological transformation and contribute to overall well-being.

Discussion

In this section, I examine hesychasm in Orthodox monastic spirituality as a path to existential meaning through radical self-transformation and ongoing self-transcendence. Using qualitative methods, direct observation and interviews with Athonite monks, I explore this process through a three-fold structure: calling, transition, and perfection. Hesychasm has been practised on Mount Athos as a living tradition for centuries. Findings show that hesychasm facilitates self-transcendence by addressing existential and psychological struggles, fostering self-awareness, and shifting values from material concerns to spiritual focus. Ultimately, hesychasm leads to the complete renewal of the self. In the discussion section, I refer to the four patterns of Hesychast spirituality – nostalgia, metanoia, Jesus prayer, and spiritual fatherhood – which are identified as crucial for spiritual development and support my hypothesis.

37 Pamela G. Reed, "Self-Transcendence: Scale and Theory," *STS-2018* (2018).

38 Michael R. Levenson, Patricia A. Jennings, Carolyn M. Aldwin, Ray W. Shiraishi, "Self-transcendence: Conceptualisation and measurement," *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 60 (2005), 127–143.

39 Cloninger et al., "A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character."

40 Harry C. Triandis, "The self and social behaviour in differing cultural contexts," *Psychological Review* 98 (1989), 506–520.

41 Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006), 302–317.

42 Yaden et al., "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience."

Nostalgia

Monastic life requires conscious and voluntary sacrifice of former life and identity. After entering monastic life, individuals must put aside family, career aspirations, friendships, hobbies, sports, travel and other forms of entertainment. During the initial stage of monastic life, monks often face a profound emotional impact due to the separation from their families. Monks often experience intense nostalgia (e.g. in dreams of family members), which creates a significant psychological burden. Younger monks, in particular, must navigate not only their own emotional struggles but also the emotional reactions of their families.⁴³ Many family members, especially parents, struggle to understand the decision to pursue a monastic path. They may miss their children and regret unfulfilled educational and career aspirations, which can intensify the emotional burden on the monks.⁴⁴ However, this detachment is crucial in disconnecting from the secular past.

Fr. A's⁴⁵ personal experience illustrates how severe nostalgia affects him during the monastic transition. After his tonsure, Fr. A reported frequent attacks, as he believed by demonic forces who appeared in his dreams, taking the form of his child and spouse. Unable to experience this intense distress, he asked his spiritual father for help: "I am going mad and cannot carry this burden."⁴⁶ However, Abba replied that he must bear this cross for the rest of his life.⁴⁷ Despite the belief that intensive ascetical training and regular confessions might minimise nostalgic influences after three years,⁴⁸ for some monks with former families, this yearning may persist throughout their entire monastic journey and become one of the primary reasons to leave the monastery.⁴⁹

In the context of Hesychast spirituality, a self-transcendent orientation helps individuals maintain well-being during adversity,⁵⁰ as monks learn to

⁴³ Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*.

⁴⁴ However, in the Trappist monasteries, most monks reported their family support and approval (William L. Smith, "Vocation Stories of Cistercian Monks," *Michigan Sociological Review* [2016], 69–90).

⁴⁵ I use pseudonyms instead of real participant's names.

⁴⁶ Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

⁴⁹ Fr. B, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

⁵⁰ Reed, "Self-Transcendence: Scale and Theory," 421.

transform negative experiences into opportunities for development.⁵¹ Monks lose connection to their family, the outside world, and their previous identity. This leads to a radical reorientation of their sources of meaning, shifting from traditional values like family, career, and hobbies to deeper, spiritually oriented associations with meaningfulness.⁵² Thus, monks' sources of meaning are reshaped and improved in depth, breadth, and balance, key factors in experiencing meaning in life.⁵³ Therefore, in psychological terms, the goal of finding and connecting deeply with God links monks to the ultimate source of meaning, which brings exceptional meaningfulness to monastic life.⁵⁴ All possible hardships of life are ultimately restored with the possibility of obtaining divine likeness, and even death is framed not as a shutting of life but as a start of a new Edenic life. This logotherapeutic reason might explain why individuals choose monastic life despite its inherent suffering and difficulties.

Metanoia

In hesychast spirituality, metanoia is a transformative process of self-examination and following repentance. Based on practices like *automempsia* (self-search) and *endoskopisi* (introspection), it requires deliberate self-analyses to identify former and current destructive elements of behaviours and thoughts to avoid them in the future.⁵⁵ This process is usually activated in the initial purification phase through regular confession (e.g. every two days for novices in Vatopedi). Moreover, the initial confession might bring an extraordinary sense of spiritual relief.⁵⁶ For instance, Fr. A reported about his general confession: "If I were to die at that moment, I would be taken directly to Heaven."⁵⁷ Following this initial sense of relief, metanoia evolves into a sustained daily practice of spiritual and mental self-regulation.

51 Linda M. Austin, "The nostalgic moment and the sense of history," *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2 (2011), 127–140.

52 E.g. generativity (spiritual), care (in the form of prayer), deep religiosity, harmony (with self, others, nature and God), development (long scale hard daily work), social commitment and community (a part of a monastic living), attentiveness (a crucial element of Jesus Prayer and spiritual life), nature relatedness (seeing the beauty of Divine creation), creativity (Schnell, *The psychology of meaning in life*, 61–62).

53 Schnell, *The psychology of meaning in life*, 60–66.

54 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 117.

55 Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*, 165.

56 The general confession is usually inquired by an experienced confessor who, through questioning, identifies the elements of inappropriate behaviour for the whole life.

57 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

Personal metanoia is realised in synergy with God and collaboration with a spiritual father or confessor. Gradually, monks and novices should develop advanced self-exploration skills to identify the destructive elements of their actions and thoughts. Deeper self-awareness leads to more in-depth self-purification. Also, metanoic transformation profits from a sincere and trusting relationship with a spiritually mature confessor or spiritual father.⁵⁸ Moreover, the value of human effort invested in the purification process (*podvig*) is significant. However, the actual results, even with the active application of all monastic spiritual means, may be hindered by the weight of previous experiences of sinful life prior to entering the monastery. As a result, more time is often needed for actual purification and, in most cases, for deeper spiritual progress after joining the monastery at a mature age.⁵⁹

“In monastic life, you can achieve either an angel-like or a demon-like life, with no limits in either direction” – claims Fr. A.⁶⁰ However, there is no universal “algorithm” for metanoia; ultimately, its process depends on individual paths to salvation and is designated differently for everyone,⁶¹ similar to theosis, as everyone is deified differently. The fruits of metanoia can manifest in various ways: as a sudden religious conversion, as for apostle Paul, like a gradual process, exemplified by St. Joseph the Hesychast’s⁶² eight years of rigorous ascetic practices, or as a lifelong struggle, as seen for St. Mary of Egypt,⁶³ or Desert Fathers who battled issues such as anger or sexual desire for decades.⁶⁴

Hesychast spirituality frames metanoia within a dual-structured ascetic system of two interrelated circles: the internal purification of the self and the eternal ritual framework that structures the ascetic journey. The outer

58 Great schema monk, personal communication, April 2, 2024.

59 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

60 Ibid.

61 Ivana Noble, “The Authority of Experience in the Hesychast Saints According to St. Gregory Palamas: The Relationship Between Ontology and Epistemology Revisited,” *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 5 (2018), 87.

62 St. Joseph the Hesychast (1897–1959) was a Greek Orthodox monk and elder who led a small monastic community on Mount Athos. His spiritual biography, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, was written by his disciple, Elder Ephrem of Arizona and is considered an important work in spiritual literature from Mount Athos. This biography serves as a handbook for many monks and practitioners of the Jesus Prayer.

63 Christian saint from the 6th century who radically changed the life of a prostitute in a big city to the harsh ascetical living in the Egyptian desert for 40 years.

64 Norman Russell (ed.), *The lives of the desert fathers* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

circle operates as a ‘technique of the body’⁶⁵, encompassing physical and mental practices to purify the self from spiritual toxins. The inner circle frames confession as part of a broader, lifelong ‘rite of passage,’ marking the monk’s journey towards salvation and ultimate union with God.⁶⁶ Further, this ritualistic process unfolds over time, with confession, prayer, and ascetic practices varying according to the individual’s spiritual burden. Asceticism and confession build the monk’s capacity to overcome temptations, preparing them for greater spiritual battles within their mind, as “90 per cent of temptations for monks come from inside”.⁶⁷ Confession and spiritual guidance are essential for addressing sinful actions and recognising *logismoï* – the negative thought forms that separate the individual from God. The aim is to redirect focus toward constant contemplation of God through prayer, gradually replacing distractions and harmful thoughts with divine remembrance.⁶⁸

The term *metanoia* (μετάνοια), literally meaning ‘change of mind,’ refers not to the change of rational intellect but to the nous (νοῦς) – a higher, God-like aspect of the mind that encompasses creativity, imagination, intuition, and spiritual insight. This distinction is vital to understanding how *metanoia* operates beyond cognitive change. This theological understanding of the nous resonates with Viktor Frankl’s psychological insights into existential frustration, particularly his concept of “noogenic neurosis”.⁶⁹ Noogenic neurosis articulates the existential tension that arises when one fails to access inner meaning or divine purpose. As Fr. A articulates: “only a crazy person would run away from this life” that he has, but despite this visible success, he felt “cursed” and could not find relief unless he started a spiritual life. In cases of noogenic issues, traditional therapy is often ineffective as the healing is required search for meaning beyond the self-interest.⁷⁰

Michel Foucault explored *metanoia* philosophically, interpreting it within Christian asceticism as a transformative process guiding individuals from earthly reality to a heavenly one.⁷¹ Thus, Christian asceticism can be

65 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2006), 77–95. (Originally published 1925.)

66 Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*, 164.

67 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

68 Makrides, “The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy.”

69 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 107.

70 Ibid.

71 “Here we have everything for spiritual growth: Eucharist, Confession, a spiritual father, and the Jesus Prayer. But it is different when you become a monk and live a monastic

understood as a reality-oriented practice with a *metanoetic* function. It guides the individual from one reality to another, providing or imposing a set of conditions, rituals, procedures, behavioural rules, and a specific method of self-transformation.⁷² Monks via metanoetic function not only transform themselves, but move to another (Edenic) reality of being.

Jesus Prayer

In hesychast spirituality, the Jesus Prayer is a central practice. Prayer life is a dynamic and creative process. Monks could adapt their prayer practice to their personalities and spiritual needs, nevertheless primarily guided by their elders and spiritual texts. While in coenobitic monasteries, the prayer life is connected to communal church services, in hermitic monasteries, monks can choose how often, when, and how they will pray.⁷³ This flexibility shows the role of individual differences in spiritual development, one of the key factors in the effectiveness of hesychastic practice.

In collaboration with elders, monks receive direction, helping to identify the practices that are suitable for their current spiritual stage and resonate with their individual experiences and personalities. Moreover, monks explore a wide variety of patristic literature and spiritual texts (e.g. *My Life with Elder Joseph, the Way of Pilgrim, Philokalia*) to discover different methods of prayer and spiritual strategies. Based on received guidance, personal exploration, and inner evaluation, hermits experiment with different spiritual practices to develop the best personalised spiritual strategy.⁷⁴ Personalising spiritual practices became important in facilitating profound changes in personal identity.⁷⁵

However, not everything is ideal in a prayer life. Monks often pray, overcoming the desire to sleep, tiredness, distractions, and various temptations,

life from the inside. Monastic life is a severe, lifelong and titanic labour that you need to perform yourself. Nobody will do it instead of you; only you are responsible. It is a constant fight with the spirits of evil, and there is no way back – the only way is up and forward. You obtain a passport to the citizenship of New Jerusalem; now, you only need to reach this place” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

72 Foucault, “*Speaking the Truth about Oneself*,” 96.

73 Fr. A and Fr. C, personal communication, April 4–5, 2024.

74 Fr. A and Fr. C, personal communication, personal observation, April 4–5, 2024.

75 Naum Ilievski, Angelina Ilievska, “Sociological dimensions of the FCP method according to Christian psychotherapy in coping with stress and suffering,” *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research* 4.3s (2017), 93–98.

even simply unwilling to pray.⁷⁶ These daily challenges are first viewed as obstacles but become part of the ascetic struggle, serving as a spiritual coping mechanism and sustaining psychological well-being. Therefore, losing the ability to pray in the monastery is considered a serious issue, as it deprives oneself of a powerful coping practice. For monks, prayer is not merely a compulsory obligation but a vital necessity. As Fr. A. explained, “The Jesus Prayer is our engine, just as petrol is for a car; an engine cannot work without fuel, just as a monk cannot live without the Jesus Prayer.”⁷⁷ Without profound engagement in Jesus Prayer, monks cannot grow spiritually and face significant difficulties in the harsh ascetic conditions of the monastery. “Without the Jesus Prayer, a monk is dead,” and thus cannot wear a black robe.⁷⁸ Thus, prayer life is a fundamental coping mechanism for spiritual and psychological well-being. Without prayer and grace, the monastery may feel like a dark place of suffering and doing unwanted things, but with the transformative power of prayer, it turns into a Paradise on Earth.

Ideally, hermits must maintain a disciplined prayer routine, as spiritual discipline is crucial for sustained spiritual growth. However, even experienced Hesychasts might occasionally struggle with a lack of focus, distractions and an inappropriate state for praying. The monks’ daily commitment to prayer is shaped by multiple factors, including their personal circumstances, psychological and emotional states, sacramental life, intentions, and physical health, which vary daily. All these factors influence prayer life – some days, prayer is easy-going, while others might be challenging. There are certain techniques to encourage prayer life. One of the techniques shared by experienced monks is recalling in thoughts the people in need to warm up the heart before the prayer: “When you have tears, your heart is ready for prayer.”⁷⁹ Choosing the most suitable approach for the prayer can also increase its effectiveness. This implies that different approaches to spiritual practices, including prayer, are essential, as they must naturally fit with everyone’s personality, emotional state, and spiritual disposition. For example, Fr. A, with a sports and military background, uses the fast

76 Participant observation, April 8–10, 2024.

77 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

78 Ibid.

79 Great schema monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024.

Athonite Rule of 1,200 repetitions of Jesus Prayer⁸⁰ in 15 minutes, what suits his energetic and disciplined personality.⁸¹

Similar to metanoia, progress in the Jesus Prayer is a human-divine collaboration. Even with great effort, spiritual progress in Jesus Prayer may come slowly or not without Holy Spirit and true contrition of a broken heart and sincere repentance. Reaching the “prayer of the heart” level, when prayer occurs effortlessly, may take decades of devoted monastic life of obedience, self-condemnation, hard work, fasting, vigilance, and prayer practice itself.⁸² For example, Fr. A, a former athlete and bodyguard, applies a sport proactive, disciplined approach to his spiritual life by setting ambitious goals and dedicating significant effort to copy the ascetic and prayer practices of St. Joseph the Hesychast.⁸³ However, despite his dedication, such as sleeping while standing and undertaking rigorous ascetic practices, Fr. A struggled to achieve significant results even after an extended training period as the burden of his past life before the monastery weighed heavily on him.⁸⁴ It is believed that reaching the level of the ‘prayer of the heart’ needs at least 10 years without “mortal sins”.⁸⁵

80 “Athonite Rule is 1200 Jesus Prayers, three prayers to the Lord, and one to the Holy Theotokos. When you pronounce ‘prayer’ in Greek, it sounds quicker, and overall Greek tradition is to say them rapidly. You can say 300 Jesus Prayers (just five words) in about 3–4 minutes. As you pray, concentrate on a particular place, but try to focus your mind in your heart (a location about two fingers below the navel) if you can” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

81 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

82 Ibid.

83 Piedmont (1999) noted that the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; Costa & McCrae, 1992), can be effective in describing the motivations of individuals who pursue spiritual or religious goals. Conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality traits, is characterised by persistence, organisation, and motivation in goal-directed behaviour. This trait encompasses six facets: self-efficacy, orderliness, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, and cautiousness. Together, these facets support sustained effort and achieving goals (Ralph L. Piedmont, “Strategies for Using the Five-Factor Model of Personality in Religious Research,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27 [1999]: 338–50; Paul T. Costa Jr., Robert R. McCrae, *The NEO PI-R Professional Manual* [Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, 1992]).

84 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

85 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

Role of a Spiritual Father

On Mount Athos, the frequent question “Do you have a spiritual father?” shows the exceptional role of spiritual guidance in monastic life. The respect, or rather the cult, of the spiritual father, is highly developed on Mount Athos, where the authority of the spiritual father might take extreme forms. “If your spiritual father asks you to fly to the Moon,” you must do so without hesitation.⁸⁶ In my personal experience, when I approached one monk to become my spiritual father, firstly, he asked me: “*Would you be listening to me?*” and led me to the nearby gulf. He took my hand, asked me to close my eyes, and told me to step forward. That illustrated a “blind trust” in the spiritual father, whether with no obedience – there is no room for proper guidance. However, this might take on a near-paranormal form. For instance, one disciple of St. Joseph, the Hesychast, was not allowed to visit a doctor due to obedience, even while experiencing severe pain.

The central idea is that denying one’s will brings alliance with God’s will, which remains hidden. While direct knowledge of God’s will is rarely accessible, spiritual fathers are seen as mediators through whom the divine orientation can be followed.⁸⁷ This unquestioning obedience serves a theological function, yet it also raises significant questions about agency and the psychological implications of surrendering personal will, especially for the multiple converts to Orthodoxy from Western countries.⁸⁸

This spiritual mentorship parallels modern therapeutic models. The spiritual father analyses thoughts, behaviours, and actions, offering guidance rooted in ascetic practice and patristic texts.⁸⁹ This mirrors

⁸⁶ Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

⁸⁷ “If I have pleased my elder, I have pleased God. I do not need other confirmations. I am absolutely convinced that these people (Abba and his ‘right hand’) are speaking from the Lord. I have a ‘blind trust’, if they say to me, ‘Jump from the mountain’, I will jump, absolute obedience” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

⁸⁸ Effective spiritual direction requires the mentor’s deep understanding of the disciple’s personal context and spiritual growth. Even so, advice from a spiritual father must be critically assessed, and the disciple can decline it (Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024).

⁸⁹ Confession in hesychasm is not merely emotional regret but a transformative process of psychological and spiritual healing that restores one’s relationship with God (Grigorios C. Tympas, “Of Shamans, Confessors and Psychotherapists: Challenges to Repentance and Confession in the Light of the Modern and Post-Modern Shift Towards a ‘Psychological’ Society,” in St. Muse, V. Thermos [eds.], *Words into Spirit: Pastoral Perspectives on Confession* [South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2019], 1–22).

cognitive-behavioural and logotherapeutic approaches by transforming destructive thoughts and prompting spiritually beneficial ones.⁹⁰ Through confession and guidance, metanoia becomes an inner healing and meaning-making process of psychological and spiritual self-transformation. However, the activation of metanoia largely depends on a personal profound mastery of the spiritual father (“at best in the state of *apathea*”⁹¹), his specific knowledge of psychology, and his life experience.⁹² Moreover, as the monastic spiritual path is marked by trials, temptations, and existential uncertainty, an inexperienced or distant spiritual father can spiritually disorient or even harm a disciple. For that reason, within the framework of Hesychastic spirituality, a close and discerning relationship with a mature spiritual father is not just beneficial but essential for navigating the demanding path of inner transformation.

Some Critics

Despite the multiple benefits of Orthodox monastic spirituality, Makrides (2017) shows that a monastic worldview might be limited due to the lack of education and specific cultural constraints. Eastern Christianity broadly challenges adapting to the intellectual demands of a globalising, culturally diverse world today. Insular fundamentalism, with a lack of understanding of other religions and demonising them as heresies, sometimes complicates Western engagement with Orthodox monasticism.⁹³

In addition to cultural critiques, there is a claim about the psychological risks of intensive spiritual practices.⁹⁴ That sometimes can lead to a detachment from the self, which is potentially transformative and may cause risks of psychological disorders.⁹⁵ The intensive sense of self-loss promoted in

90 Tympas, “Of Shamans, Confessors and Psychotherapists.”

91 Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024.

92 Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 2, 2024.

93 Makrides, “The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy.”

94 John Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002).

95 Matthias Michal, Heide Glaesmer, Rüdiger Zwerenz, Achim Knebel, Jörg Wiltink, Elmar Brähler, Manfred E. Beutel, “Base rates for depersonalisation according to the 2-item version of the Cambridge Depersonalization Scale (CDS-2) and its associations with depression/anxiety in the general population,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 128 (2011), 106–111; Francesca Ferri, Francesca Frassinetti, Francesca Mastrangelo, Anatolia Salone, Filippo M. Ferro, Vittorio Gallese, “Bodily self and schizophrenia: The loss of implicit self-body knowledge,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 21 (2012), 1365–1374.

Hesychasm is similar to depersonalisation that appears in schizophrenia and specific psychotic episodes.⁹⁶ Moreover, the pursuit of extraordinary spiritual experiences may signal or contribute to psychological distress.⁹⁷ Overall, the diminished or absent 'sense of self' in mystical practices poses psychological risks.⁹⁸

However, recent studies have found no correlation between mystical experiences and psychoticism or neuroticism.⁹⁹ Similarly, Scrutton (2024) argues that there is no link between faith and mental illness. She warns against the narcissistic overvaluation of inner experiences, like *mysterium tremendum* (the awe-filled encounter with the divine) and following aspiring idealisation of that mental state¹⁰⁰, which cannot be viewed as the goal of spiritual practice for hesychasts. Nevertheless, self-loss should be viewed as a potential alteration of consciousness, which could have either pathological or positive effects.¹⁰¹

A more sceptical view holds that self-transcendent experiences (STEs) are merely 'sensory pageantry' – vivid phenomena that make religious beliefs more memorable without deeper significance.¹⁰² This perspective suggests that STEs are a spandrel, a byproduct of another adaptation that provides no distinct evolutionary advantage.¹⁰³ Also, modern scientific research discusses STE induction through natural practices like meditation and prayer,¹⁰⁴ or

96 George E. Atwood, Donna M. Orange, Robert D. Stolorow, "Shattered worlds/psychotic states: A post-Cartesian view of the experience of personal annihilation," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 19 (2002), 281–306; Ferri et al., "Bodily self and schizophrenia: The loss of implicit self-body knowledge."

97 Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Harold G. Koenig, Peter J. Verhagen, Dan J. Stein, "WPA Position Statement on Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 1 (2016), 87–88.

98 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

99 Dale Caird, "Religiosity and personality: Are mystics introverted, neurotic, or psychotic?," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 26 (1987), 345–346.

100 Tasia Scrutton, "Psychopathology and Religious Experience? Toward a Both – And View," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2024), 243–256.

101 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

102 Justin L. Barrett, "Exploring the natural foundations of religion," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2000), 29–34.

103 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

104 Andrew Newberg, Abass Alavi, Michael Baime, Michael Pourdehnad, Jill Santanna, Eugene d'Aquili, "The measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during the complex cognitive task of meditation: A preliminary SPECT study," *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 106 (2001), 113–122.

retreats,¹⁰⁵ and artificially, through non-invasive brain stimulation,¹⁰⁶ or psychopharmacological interventions.¹⁰⁷ These advancements raise the question of whether artificial inductions produce similar effects to natural STEs and the potential risks of such artificial inductions.

Gaps and Contribution, Suggestions for Future Studies

This study detected several novel findings within the study of Hesychastic spirituality, especially when examined through the lens of self-transcendence. Jesus Prayer emerges not only as a central spiritual discipline for hermits but also as a coping mechanism during adversity, functioning simultaneously as a transformative practice essential to both spiritual and psychological well-being. Spiritual practices adapted to everyone's personality, emotional condition, and spiritual disposition might increase effectiveness. That might mean that the Hesychastic tradition implicitly recognises the role of personality in spiritual development despite lacking explicit articulation in contemporary psychological or instructional terms. However, applying the lens of self-transcendence to the empirical study of Orthodox monastic spirituality does not necessarily mean that theosis, as an ontological transformation, could be approached similarly to the modern concepts of well-being and happiness, which are more focused on emotional and meaning-based essence.

This study also identifies the divergence from previous research findings. For instance, Paganopoulos (2012) suggests that nostalgia can typically be resolved within a limited frame, e.g., a three-year novitiate period at Vatopedi

105 Ralph W. Hood, Jr., "The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14 (1975), 29–41.

106 David B. Yaden, Jonathan Iwry, Andrew B. Newberg, "Neuroscience and religion: Surveying the field," in N. K. Clements (ed.), *Religion: Mental Religion: Part of the Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Religion series* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 277–299.

107 Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Matthew W. Johnson, Una D. McCann, Robert Jesse, "Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22 (2008), 621–632; Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una D. McCann, Robert Jesse, "Psilocybin can occasion mystical experiences with substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006), 268–283.

Monastery.¹⁰⁸ However, this study indicates that for monks who had their own families, nostalgia might be present throughout their lives. Emotional experiences surrounding nostalgia and family separation may vary depending on individual backgrounds and spiritual contexts. Moreover, nostalgia emerged as a significant factor that affected monks' return to secular life. However, compensated by the coping mechanism of self-transcendence, nostalgia became a form of suffering that contributes to profound personal and spiritual growth by facilitating the discovery of deeper meaning in life.¹⁰⁹

Paganopoulos' work similarly showed the monastic tonsure as a voluntary self-sacrifice, representing a significant milestone in spiritual transformation. Monks take eternal vows at this stage, marking a point of no return.¹¹⁰ While this commitment may provide spiritual relief, it can also intensify psychological strain due to its irreversible nature. An overly romanticised picture of monastic life must be balanced by an awareness of its demanding and lifelong nature – requiring consistent daily motivation and discipline to perform tasks against personal will, all in pursuit of spiritual rewards that may only manifest in the afterlife. Another important finding concerns the influence of past experiences on current spiritual development, raising the question of how, from a scientific perspective, memory and embodied cognitive patterns shape actual progress in spiritual life.

Conclusions

For the first time, the study empirically considers Hesychast spirituality as a sustained path to self-transcendence. While previous research has addressed self-transcendent experiences in contexts like meditation or psychedelics,¹¹¹ Hesychasm remains underexplored in terms of its psychological depth and lived reality. Using interviews with Athonite monks, this research confirms that Hesychasm constitutes a complex spiritual path towards self-transcendence with theological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. This article focused on the transition phase, while the following two will cover the stage of calling and perfection necessary for the total picture of monistic spiritual transformation via Hesychasm.

¹⁰⁸ Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

¹⁰⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

¹¹⁰ Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

¹¹¹ Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

As patristic writers Evagrius, St. Maximus the Confessor and St. John Climacus, as modern theorists such as Rambo¹¹² or Horujy¹¹³ refers to the similar sequential steps in the spiritual transformation. Through the dissolution of ego and existential reframing, monks radically reorganise, transcend previous mental constructs, reconstruct new personal narratives, and deeply spiritually and psychologically integrate into a new paradigm of life and meaning.¹¹⁴ The monastic path includes a necessity of self-transcendence via deliberate withdrawal from conventional sources of ego-gratification and social identity. The initial phase of solitude creates an existential tension vital in opening psychological and spiritual space for transformation beyond ordinary consciousness. The monastery's "non-luxury" conditions with no access to entertainment, technologies,¹¹⁵ and modern comforts are not about self-masochism. Instead, it is based on centuries-old traditions of spiritual life that create a highly supportive environment structured to transcend the self's habitual patterns.¹¹⁶ The monk's daily routine centred on prayer, physical labour, and minimal comfort, systematically rebuilding the personality structure shaped by comfort-seeking and self-validation. This everyday transcendence is much closer to Maslow's "plateau experiences", a sustained state of transcendence achieved through disciplined practice rather than spontaneous peak experiences.¹¹⁷

A key limitation of this study is dealing with highly abstract and complex experiential phenomena parts of Hesychast spirituality, which currently lack standardised evaluation and empirical measurement criteria. *Furthermore, monks in advanced stages of spiritual development might hesitate and hide their personal experience, making applying various scientific measurement tools or digital methodologies difficult.* The article did not discuss several important factors related to the transition phase, such as sacramental life, fasting, sleep deprivation, the supportive environment of the monastery, the

112 Rambo, Lewis R., "Theories of conversion: Understanding and interpreting religious change." *Social Compass* 46.3 (1999), 259–271.

113 Sergey Horujy, "Hermeneutics of Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology," *sinergia-isa. ru* [accessed 16/12/2021] (2010).

114 Rambo, "Theories of conversion."

115 Certain monks can access social media and email, maintain YouTube channels, and actively communicate online via various media platforms.

116 Makrides, "The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy."

117 Nicole Gruel, "The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 47.1 (2015), 44.

role of monastic tonsure, and other essential factors identified in studies. This omission was due to text limitations. Moreover, the findings are based on a limited sample of male hermits from a single monastic community on Mount Athos, which might differ across the broader spectrum of Orthodox monastic traditions. However, narrative analysis, with further identification of parallels in psychological studies, might be an effective empirical method of discovering hesychasm. Exploring these aspects offers promising directions for advancing the scientific understanding of such rare experiential phenomena, particularly in its radical form, though the field remains highly challenging.

So, approaching the most ambitious goal humans could ever achieve – God's likeness, monks apply the most effective methods. They know what they do and why they do it. They do only that and do it very professionally. They live in a highly supportive environment where everyone does the same and are skilfully supervised by spiritual experts. The results would be profound if that strategy were applied to any other goal. However, as the goal is so high, the methods must be very professional.

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