

**Some Comments and Questions for Discussion on  
*The Mountain of Silence* by Kyriacos Markides**

**Background to book: Who is Kyriacos Markides?** A Greek Cypriot, raised in the Orthodox Christian faith, educated in the United States and currently a professor of sociology at the University of Maine. Markides says that he arrived in the US in the '60's for his higher education. "The cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism of America, where religion is a preference rather than a fate, shattered" his "naïve faith in the Christian religion, the Church and the God of my forefathers and grandmothers."

From this comes a major problem for Orthodoxy today: During his agnostic phase, Markides says that "whatever ties I kept with the religion of my youth remained exclusively cultural. I continued to think of myself as a Greek Orthodox, but a secular Greek Orthodox, in the same way that a secular Jew is still a Jew." (pp. 1-3)

**Question for discussion:** Is it even possible to be "a secular Greek Orthodox?" To be an Orthodox Christian but not believe, for example, "in a personal God?" Or in Christ?

**Please note an important distinction between Christian mysticism and other forms of mysticism:** "When human beings completely obliterate their own egotism and reach the state of *theosis*, or union with God, then whatever they wish is what God wishes. In the Christian mystical tradition, the ultimate state of *theosis* does not imply the obliteration of one's personality." (p. 10)

"According to the tradition of the holy elders and Christianity in general, the individual soul does not lose its uniqueness upon its return to God. This particular point may be one of the key differences between the spirituality of the Christian elders and some Buddhist beliefs concerning the final destination of the human soul. From the perspective of the Christian elders, what is annihilated through catharsis (cleansing, purification) is not the inner, self-aware "I-ness" but the sum total of egotistical passions that obstruct our vision of God. St. Seraphim of Sarov may be in a state of oneness with God, but he still remains autonomous within that oneness as a self-aware soul, as St. Seraphim serving God's plan." (p.218)

**The three eyes by which we perceive reality:** "The late Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin and transpersonal thinkers like Ken Wilbur claim that we can know reality in three ways: through the "eye of the senses" (empirical science); through the "eye of reason" (philosophy, logic and mathematics) and through the "eye of contemplation" (systematic and disciplined spiritual practice to open up the spiritual and intuitive faculties of the self). These are three different and unique orders of reality with their own legitimate and distinct domains, laws and characteristics that cannot be reduced into one another. An "integralist" approach to truth, as the late Sorokin always reminded us, presupposes honoring and cultivating all three "eyes" at once."

**Question for discussion:** Is it even possible for an individual, or perhaps a civilization, to cultivate all three "eyes" at once? If so, what would this look like?

**Women on Mt. Athos:** “During the brutal period of the Nazi occupation of Greece...a number of Greek Jewish women and their children found refuge on the Holy Mountain. The Athonite fathers hid them there for the entire duration of Nazi rule. In doing so they violated an 11<sup>th</sup> century taboo barring entrance to women. It is allegedly the only time an exception was made to that prohibition.” (p. 13)

**An ecumenical moment - the Pope’s apology:** In May, 2001 Pope John Paul II said, in an address to Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, the leading bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece, “For the occasions past and present, when the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by actions and omission against their Orthodox brothers and sisters, may the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg of Him.” The various reactions of some of the Athonite monks are discussed on pages 240-241, particularly the very positive reaction of the Romanian Elder Dionysios, a 92-year old hermit considered to be a living saint on the level of Elder Paisios. “The long-bearded and frail-looking hermit made the sign of the Cross, raised his arms toward the sky, and with delight pronounced that this was the best news he had heard in a long time. When Father Seraphim, one of the two monks who accompanied us there, reacted with skepticism, the Elder Dionysios counseled that “when someone asks for forgiveness we have no choice but to forgive, without any reservations or second thoughts. This is what Christ asks of us.” The old hermit, in his soft, accented Greek, went on to instruct us on the virtues of patience, forgiveness, humility and love, central values of the culture of the Holy Mountain.”

**How Athonite monks understand the Bible:** “The Bible must be seen...first and foremost...as a therapeutic tool to heal our existential alienation from God, a guidebook on how to conduct our lives so that we may be helped to re-establish our connection with God.” (p. 48)

**Questions for discussion:** How should this understanding of the Biblical text shape our understanding of it and its use by us for spiritual growth and development? Can there be any connections drawn between Father Maximos’ approach and that of the Trappist monk and priest Michael Casey in his book about Benedictine *lectio divina*, *Sacred Reading*?

**What is theology?** “Knowledge of God,” Father Maximos urges, “is not gained through books on theology and dogma. Knowledge of God can only be attained through long and arduous spiritual practices. A poor and humble peasant may become a saint as a result of arduous spiritual practices and ceaseless prayer, and therefore have knowledge of God, whereas a scholar who publishes volumes on theology but who is proud because of his worldly achievements may be completely ignorant of God.” (p. 55)

**Questions for discussion:** While this may often be true, isn’t this in some ways an easy oversimplification? What about well-educated intellectuals like St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, both of whom combine in their persons the best scholarship of their day and the intense spiritual practices of monasticism? Indeed, St. Basil, one of the most well educated men of his time, is considered by many to be the “father” of eastern monasticism. Wouldn’t this “erudite monasticism,” as the late Roman Catholic priest and scholar Louis Boyer once commented, be the ideal?