

## A BOOK AND ITS CRITICS

### ***Na Gorakh Kavkaza* by Schema-monk Ilarion**

In 1947 an elderly monk sent this advice to his spiritual daughter:

When you read the book *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* (In the Mountains of the Caucasus), omit from the middle of page *xi* to the middle of page *xvii*, as well as the third and fourth chapters. In those places mistakes have crept in. The enemy influenced the author in order to undermine the readers' confidence. Read it with trust, it is a very useful book. I often have a glance at it, for one can see that it was written not with the mind but with feeling and with the taste of the spiritual fruits of the one thing needful. (Father John 24)

This book he so ambivalently recommended was first published in 1907 and was intended to popularize the Jesus prayer. But instead of inspiring piety it inspired controversy. From the beginning a debate about these "mistakes" arose, with one side considering them not to be mistakes at all while the other saw in them a heresy so vile the book was worthy only of burning.

The author was a septuagenarian monk of the great schema named Ilarion. He had received monastic tonsure on Mt. Athos at the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon and had stayed there for more than two decades before departing for the Caucasus. There he lived first in the monastery of St. Simon the Canaanite and later in the wilderness in order to lead a solitary life devoted to prayer. Two more decades after leaving Athos he decided to write a book, the purpose of which was "to express all the need, importance, and necessity of practicing the Jesus prayer in the matter of eternal salvation for every person." (X)

It was comprised of three parts, the first and longest consisting of a first-person fictional narrative in which the author presented himself as an anchorite traveling through remote areas of the Caucasus. In the story this hermit meets another even more ancient and venerable starets, and

the latter deigns to share with the former some wisdom from his vast experience in the spiritual life. It is through the older and wiser man that Ilarion's own views are expressed. The second and third parts of the books are relatively unimportant, one being a summary of the Gospels and the other a compilation of personal letters written by the author over the years.

While providing many opportunities to praise the natural beauties of the Caucasus and its unique suitability for monks seeking the eremitic life, this setting serves primarily as a framework for extolling the virtues of the Jesus prayer.

### **Ilarion's Focus on the Divine Name**

Ilarion adduced all the standard arguments in favor of the Jesus prayer but placed special emphasis on the importance of a mystical identity between the divine name and the divine person:

For the believer who loves the Lord and always prays to him, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is as it were (как бы) he himself, our divine Savior. And this great truth is really sensed best of all when one practices the Jesus prayer of mind and heart. (XVI) In the practice of the Jesus prayer of mind and heart, done in a repentant attitude of soul and in deep contrition, with your heart's feeling you really hear and perceive that Jesus Christ's name is he himself our divine Savior Jesus Christ, and it is impossible to separate the name from the person named. Rather, they merge into identity and interpenetrate one another and are one. (119)

Hence "in God's name God himself is present -- in his whole essence (всем своим существом) and in all his infinite characteristics." (11) Just as in Jesus Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9), so too "in his holy name abides that very fullness of divinity immutably." (118) Since it is "holy in itself" it imparts sanctity to us who pronounce it in prayer. Since it "contains in itself eternal life and heavenly blessedness" (263) it imparts those qualities to us.

Fr. Ilarion acknowledges that there are many divine names, all as fundamentally equal as are the persons of the Holy Trinity (XIV), but he emphasizes the name "Jesus Christ" because of the unique role of the Son of God as mankind's Savior and because among all his names, this one alone refers directly to that role:

The name "Jesus" means Savior, and he is so close to the human race, needed by it, and constitutes such exceptional necessity for it, that without him it is not even possible to think of our salvation. ... In all prayers

rising from earth to heaven he is the Mediator, Intercessor, and Reconciler; only by him and through him do our prayers receive power and do we have access to the Heavenly Father and to the throne of grace. (VI)

Consequently our prayers should be directed first of all to him. And so "the name Jesus Christ constitutes the root and foundation, the center and internal power of the Gospel" (29), and on it depends "both our Christian faith and all of the church's worship and piety." (53)

Therefore the Jesus prayer, since it consists primarily of Jesus' name, can and should replace all other prayers in one's private prayer life. "It, excepting only the Divine Liturgy, with which nothing can compare, abundantly replaces any other practice of prayer of ours. Or rather, truer to say, it rests at the root and serves as the foundation of all our prayer activity." (260) One who is far advanced in the practice of prayer may even drop the petition "have mercy on me, a sinner" and recite just the names "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," or "Lord Jesus Christ," or "Jesus Christ," or even "Jesus" (though the final option is rarely mentioned and is not advocated). Of his own experience the author writes:

With time and from long practice this prayer began to contract and finally stopped on the three words "Lord Jesus Christ". It became impossible to pronounce more than this; all was superfluous and somehow wouldn't fit into the system of internal feeling. But what an inexpressible, purely heavenly, sweet feeling in the heart, unattainable by any of the people of this world! These three Divine words as it were (БУДТО) became incarnate, became clothed in divinity; in them vitally, essentially, and actively was heard the presence of the Lord himself, Jesus Christ. (324) For the sake of this [prayer] I decisively left every other spiritual exercise, whatever it might have been: reading and standing and prostrations and psalm singing. It constitutes my service both day and night. In whatever situation I find myself -- walking, sitting, and lying -- I only diligently try to carry in my heart the sweetest name of the Savior; even often just two words: "Jesus Christ". (325)

### **Ilarion's Supporting Evidence**

Fr. Ilarion is not able to cite direct scriptural evidence for his assertions, but indirect evidence abounds. Those passages in which the power of Jesus' name is not specifically linked to the individual believer's faith are deemed particularly noteworthy, especially Matthew 7:21:

If this name is not God then why does it possess omnipotent power which produces great and glorious works, even independently of the holiness of life of those who pronounce it? This, by the way, can be seen from the words of the Lord, "many will say to me in that day: 'Did we not prophecy in your name and by your name cast out demons and by your name worked miracles?' And then I will tell them: 'I never knew

you; depart from me all workers of iniquity." In these words is found a new proof, having all power of indisputable persuasiveness, that in the name of Jesus Christ, God's omnipotent power is present and therefore this very name is God himself. (17)

Ilarion does concede that the name does not always give expected results, observing that in Acts 19 some unbelievers tried to use Jesus' name to cast out demons and got beat up for their efforts. Nevertheless one can be sure that the name itself does possess miracle-working power when "pronounced with faith". (19)

As for patristic writings, St. Gregory of Sinai had said "prayer is God working all in all," so if St. Gregory "was not afraid to call prayer God" (45), neither would Ilarion be. Other statements, less directly applicable, could be found in other fathers from as far back as John Chrysostom: "Unceasingly abide in the name of the Lord Jesus, so that the Lord will absorb the heart, and the heart the Lord; and the two will be one." (1) Most are similar to this, the vast majority coming from later sources such as Kallistos and Ignatius Ksanthopoulos, Theofan the Recluse, and Ignatius Bryanchaninov.

The only authority cited who expresses himself exactly as does Fr. Ilarion is Fr. John Sergiev of Kronstadt (1829-1908), a man who although not having the authority of an officially canonized saint was nevertheless widely revered as one:

Let the name of the Lord, of the Mother of God, of an angel, or of a saint be for you in place of the Lord himself, the Mother of God, the angel, or the saint; let the closeness of your word to your heart be a pledge and a testimony of the closeness to your heart of the Lord himself, the Mother of God, the angel, or the saint. The name of the Lord is the Lord himself ... the name of the Mother of God is the Mother of God, the name of an angel is the angel, the name of a saint is the saint. How can this be? You are called, for example, N. If someone calls you by this name, you acknowledge yourself entirely (всего) in it and answer; that means that you agree that your name is you yourself with [your] soul and body. (15-166, quoting Моя Жизнь 237-8)

Fr. John concludes that if this is true of earth-bound human beings, then it is so even more for God and his saints, whose ability to respond is not limited by a material body. "And so," he concludes, "the name of the all-powerful God is God himself -- the Spirit everywhere present and undivided (препростый)."

In addition to quoting authorities, Ilarion offers his own explanations. He observes that all Orthodox Christians acknowledge God's presence everywhere yet do not say it is the same everywhere: the divine presence in a Church is not exactly as it is elsewhere; God's presence in the eucharistic elements is not exactly as it is in ordinary bread and wine; his presence in a believer is not exactly the same as it is in an unbeliever. How then could one argue against a special mode of divine presence in the divine name? (See *XIII*, 46, 113)

Besides that, one must not try to apply logic where logic is out of place. Statements like Jesus' "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (Jn 6:54) and "if a person is not born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3) are seen as similar in nature to Ilarion's own assertions:

Of course, this must be understood spiritually, by a heart enlightened, and not by that fleshly reason which ... objects, "How can this man give his flesh to eat?" Or again objects in its complete misunderstanding of the matter, "how can a person, being old, enter a second time into [his] mother's womb and be born?" ... spiritual subjects are understood spiritually, in the light of their illumination by grace. (11; see Jn 6:52 and 3:4)

Just as we do not fully understand the mystery of the eucharist and of baptism yet accept their reality, so we should approach the mystery of God's name.

As St. Paul writes, "The natural person cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolish to him and he cannot know them, for they are discerned spiritually." (1 Cor 2:14) This spiritual discernment is possible only for those who have directly and personally experienced communion with God:

Only such a person, due to the union of his heart with the Lord ... can without hesitation witness before the whole world that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is He Himself, the Lord God; and that His name is not separable from His holy essence but is one with Him. He is convinced in this not by reasonings of the mind but by the feeling of his heart, which is imbued with the Lord's Spirit. Here one must apply the Apostle's words: "The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness within himself." (13; 1 Jn 5:10)

Ilarion uses words like "feeling" and "sense" (чувство and ощущение) to refer to a direct perception of spiritual reality comparable to the way our eyes see the light of the material world. So any attempt at explaining the fruits of prayer to one who has not personally tasted them is as

doomed to failure as an attempt at explaining the sweetness of honey to one who has never tasted it or the variety of colors to one who is color-blind.

### **Ilarion's definition of "Name"**

Precisely what then is this "name of God" through which one can taste the fruits of prayer? Ilarion stresses that it is never limited to particular combinations of spoken or written letters:

Certainly one can also pray to the Son of God without the so-called Jesus prayer, even without words -- just by a striving of the mind and heart. But firstly this is an achievement of those advanced in the spiritual life, absolutely unattainable for the majority; and secondly even in such contemplative, refined, and immaterial prayer the name of Jesus Christ cannot be excluded. Otherwise to what would the prayer adhere and to what would it attach itself? (76)

Here the very thought of God is equated with his name, and in fact Ilarion explicitly and frequently acknowledges "the Jesus prayer," "the name of God," and "remembrance of God" to be synonymous.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly Ilarion also acknowledges a sense in which all prayer truly is the Jesus prayer, since as one of the Holy Trinity and through his unique role as Mediator and Intercessor, Jesus Christ "constitutes its [i.e., any prayer's] internal power, even if his most holy name is not audible." (125)

### **Ilarion's Warnings Against Possible Misunderstandings**

*Na Gorakh Kavkaza* does not present an oversimplified view of how prayer works. The book is full of warnings not to expect too much too soon; one must be prepared for years of hard labor with little or no apparent success. Moreover, prayer may even be harmful if one does not attend to certain other matters, one of which is having faith in God. In a sense it is even impossible to conceive of prayer without faith; if one did not believe in God and trust that he listens to people, one would not attempt to speak to him. Consequently "faith enters into the understanding of prayer, as its essential part" (125) and is its "inner power and content". (74)

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<sup>5</sup>As Pederson observes, such usage is typical of Hebrew thought as well: "The word memory or remembrance, זכר, is used in exactly the same manner as [the word name,] שם, in order to designate the name, and so also the soul." (1:256)

Their relationship is mutually dependent: "Faith without prayer can have no movement forward, and prayer without faith has no effectiveness -- is dead." (303)

No less important is humility. The spiritual life of movement toward union with God cannot even begin without a movement toward self:

The movement toward self consists in a person's coming to know his fallen sinful condition and the corruption of all his powers; their complete incapability of good and constant tendency toward evil; and his extreme powerlessness in the matter of salvation. One must see all the inescapability and decisive need of God's help. This knowledge is higher and more valuable than any other knowledge because it opens to us the door to the reception of higher help. Without this knowledge the help will not come, and without that our salvation cannot take place. (193)

We must cooperate with that help by attempting to live according to the precepts of the gospel. But this requires first of all that we know them:

The whole goal of our life and of all its content consists in loving the Lord God. But how can this be, when we don't know his deeds, his teaching, the qualities of his character, or his perfections (of course, insofar as this is attainable for us). For our part there can be no reasonable, correct relationship to our Savior without knowing his divine person. Therefore it is necessary to diligently study the earthly life of the Savior ... in all detail and in all thoroughness; to delve into his divine teaching, to learn well his parables, and to contemplate his saving passion, death, and life-bearing resurrection. This is the only ground and living foundation where the saving tree can grow -- the Jesus prayer. (301)

Ilarion suggests that the Gospel books actually be memorized. But then as we learn God's commandments we must try to abide by them, avoiding sin and loving God and neighbor, or else our prayers will be to no avail. For instance:

If, due to our weakness and sinful habits or what's more by inattention and absent-mindedness, we offend one of our brothers, then it is absolutely necessary to use all possible means available to us to make peace with him and ask forgiveness ... this is the main thing in prayer. Without observing this you will have no success in prayer, even if you persist in it day and night for years. (50) If you retain bitterness against someone, then understand that your prayer is not acceptable before God but rather angers him. (196-7)

The author also warns that his advice about the Jesus prayer is not for just anyone but is specifically for members of the Holy Orthodox Church. Outside the church salvation is not to be found, and its rites are established by the Holy Spirit for our salvation and are not to be disdained. Indeed, it is that union with God given preeminently in the eucharist that prayer itself serves to establish and maintain.

It would seem that there are quite a few prerequisites to the practice of the Jesus prayer, but in fact they are not truly prerequisites at all:

Those guides speak falsely, who teach one to acquire various virtues first; to expel passions from oneself, to purify the heart, and then to begin the Jesus prayer. That's impossible. For by our own powers we definitely cannot do anything good, as holy scripture teaches us. Rather, specifically with the help of prayer, while practicing it, one must do all one's deeds. And this is appropriate to the true situation of our earthly life, that we in every matter ask for God's help. (264)

Even the ability to concentrate on the words of the prayer is not truly a prerequisite:

Usually they say: "Is absent-minded, inattentive prayer, full of all possible [extraneous] thoughts, really pleasing to God?!" But one must know that it is not possible to do any work well immediately. Everyone knows this by experience -- how much time, effort, and trouble it has cost each of us to learn the work he does in life. Just so, prayer, which is the highest science -- heavenly, divine, holy, uniting us with our Creator -- necessarily must pass through the initial stages of one's learning and getting accustomed to it, in a condition extremely weak, not corresponding to its great dignity. But this must not serve for us as a cause and pretense for leaving and despising it. (48)

The author laments that many, including some monks, are indeed neglecting the Jesus prayer, some of them even advising others against using it due to the danger of falling into *prelest'*. In the monastic milieu this is a technical term for a state of delusion, sometimes approaching insanity, wherein the monk mistakes truth for falsehood. While thinking himself to be serving God he is actually serving the devil; while thinking himself in the depths of humility he is actually in the heights of pride and vainglory. Monks in advanced stages of *prelest'* have been known to do things like jumping off of cliffs expecting God to save them. Ilarion agrees that practicing the Jesus prayer can lead to such a state but argues that this comes about only when no concomitant effort is made at maintaining an attitude of humility and living a sinless life, or when some method

of practicing the prayer is made an end in itself rather than a means to the end of communion with God.

### **Publication and Initial Success of *Na Gorakh Kavkaza***

So to counter the trend away from the Jesus prayer *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* was written. And written well. Fr. John of Valaamo gave the book such a positive evaluation for good reason; it presents an authentic and accurate picture of Orthodox spirituality. As for what some would call "mistakes" and others "heresy," it is evident even in the text of the first edition that the author was well aware that some of his assertions were potentially controversial. He mentions that "for theological science almost everyone reproaches and condemns me" and that he learned of the inability of "fleshly reason" to accept talk of God's presence in his name only after asking many people what they thought of the idea and hearing the negative reactions.

Accordingly, before committing his opinions to print he took the precaution of writing to a large number of "authoritative and theologically educated" persons asking their comments. Most didn't bother responding, and those who did simply said they did not feel competent to answer his questions. Though satisfied then that his views were at least not obviously erroneous, he nevertheless expressed them guardedly. In *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* most occurrences of "the name of God is God himself" are qualified by "as it were" (как бы) or "for the believer" or a combination of the two. That such modifiers are found less frequently in sentences speaking of God's presence in his name may be a reflection of greater confidence in the defensibility of that assertion.

In any case the grand duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna (Tsar Nicholas' sister-in-law) saw no reason not to finance the publication of Ilarion's book through her convent of Sts. Martha and Mary; the ecclesiastical censor saw no reason not to approve it for publication; and a remarkably large number of the Russian public saw no reason not to buy it. Within three years its popularity even called forth a second edition -- no small feat for a book of such content published by what would today be called a "vanity press". By 1912 subsidies were no longer needed, and the Kiev Pecherskaya Lavra reportedly paid Ilarion a large sum for the right to issue the third edition that year. However, commercial success is never a sure indication of universal approval, and in this case criticism was immediate and exceedingly harsh.

### **Khrisanf's Critical Review**

Shortly after the first copies of *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* arrived on Athos in 1907, the monk Khrisanf of the skete of St. Elijah wrote a scathing "Review"<sup>6</sup> of Ilarion's book, hectographed copies of it, mailed one of them to the author, and disseminated the rest throughout the Russian communities of the Holy Mountain. One of his two main criticisms was against Ilarion's identification of God's name with his person:

And so the author personalizes the nominal, immaterial "name Jesus" into the living and very highest Essence of God. Such a thought is *pantheistic*, i.e. merging the essence of God with something located outside his essence. Such thoughts as Fr. Ilarion has expressed are not found in any writings of the holy fathers, and this is some kind of new teaching, fantastic and filled with vagueness and full of obscurity. See to what extremes conceit leads! (4:75)

Being "holy by itself" (само по себе) the name does sanctify us, but to "divinize" it (обоготворять) is a great error. Divine power comes directly from God himself, not from the name itself; we do glorify the latter and it is dear to us, but only because it serves as a means by which we can call upon God, only as a "mediating power" (посредствующая сила). The process is similar with human names:

[When] we think of some beloved person, then in our mind he himself is represented in his image and with his virtues, but not only in his name alone. His name only reminds us that it is specifically he and not someone else, and after all we love him not for his name but for his virtues or for a close relationship with him. (6:55)

Khrisanf adduces a series of patristic quotations saying that the goal of prayer is to establish in one's mind the thought or memory of God, and he warns against the grave dangers of "stopping only on his name alone". The true goal of all who pray is rather "pure prayer," a wordless -- and therefore nameless -- state of ecstasy consisting of direct communion with God himself. In that state "the name Jesus is without effect (пребывает без действия) ... and a person doesn't even call to mind (упоминает) this name." (6:59)

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<sup>6</sup>References are to the version published later in *Russkiy Inok* numbers 4, 5, and 6 of 1912.

Therefore to concentrate on God's name as Ilarion advises is to forget about God himself. This is why the fathers:

... created many prayers, in which everything relates to the Lord Jesus himself, as to the *living* One who gives us blessings, but not to his name. And in church services [one hears] constantly pronounced magnification and glorification of the Lord himself and worship from us to him, but not to his name. (6:53)

Likewise, the martyrs suffered not for refusing "to deny the 'name Jesus'" but for refusing to deny the Christian faith.

Moreover, the logical consequences of Ilarion's views obviously do not come about:

If the inanimate names in the Jesus prayer were incarnated into the very Essence of divinity, then they *always* and *everywhere* would have *living* and effective power ... However these names only have power in the prayer of pious people. (5:57)

Nor does even Matthew 7:21 with its suggestion that impious people were able to work miracles in the Lord's name support Ilarion's view. Rather, according to St. John Chrysostom that passage serves mainly to show that even those with faith to work miracles will not enter the kingdom of heaven without living a good life. And other fathers explain that the miracle-workers spoken to are false prophets who only pretended to use the Lord's name but actually performed their miracles by the power of Satan. Khrisanf himself thinks they may be people who once acquired the gift of working miracles but later "quenched the spirit". He interprets the passage as applying directly to Ilarion, for whom the words "I never knew you" will mean "You knew my name but not me myself". In any case St. Chrysostom also explains that grace was given to unrighteous people to work miracles because God chose to do so in order to facilitate the spread of Christianity in its earliest days. "But now let Fr. Ilarion point to anyone from the unworthy [people] who produces miracles." (5:59) Presumably he cannot, and that disproves his teaching.

The other main criticism is that Ilarion ascribes disproportionate significance to the name "Jesus," advocating its use alone in place of the whole Jesus prayer. But in fact, avers Khrisanf, the other names are even more important, particularly "Son of God," since it "designates the divine

Hypostasis<sup>7</sup> of the Savior and belongs to him before the ages, [before] all that was created by God, whereas the name Jesus was given to the Son of God afterwards, at his incarnation on earth." (4:72) Besides not being eternal like the others, "Jesus" is not even a divine name but a human one:

And is it possible to merge this human name with divinity, when the very human nature taken up by the Son of God may not be merged with his divine nature and it only unites in his one person, while whoever merges them -- then this constitutes a terrible heresy according to the conclusion of the Ecumenical Council. So much more is it impermissible to merge the name Jesus, which applies to the human nature of the God-man, with his divine nature. To attribute that which is characteristic and proper only of the divine nature to that which does not have this nature -- this is beyond foolishness and impiety! (6:59)

Ilarion's position is therefore tantamount to saying that in the one person of the Son of God there are two Gods -- one his essence and the other his human name Jesus.

The scriptural evidence cited by Ilarion is attacked as having been misinterpreted. All those texts in which Jesus advises his followers to "ask the Father in my name" and where miracles are worked "in Jesus' name" refer not to the name *per se* but to the Son of God's role as Mediator and Intercessor. Even Phil 2:9 ("God gave him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow") provides no support for Ilarion's views: the name "above every name" is actually not the "human name Jesus" but rather the name "Son of God" which refers to the Lord's divine nature. The verse means simply "God gave to Jesus the name Son of God" and ascribes no special honor to the name "Jesus".

With regard to both of his main criticisms the reviewer radically misrepresents Ilarion's views by ascribing to "name" a narrowness of meaning foreign to Ilarion. As has been seen, the latter used "the name of God" to mean not only mere combinations of letters but also all that is meant by phrases like "thought of God" and "memory of God," a usage in accord with that of Christian scripture. Khrisanf might have argued against "divinizing" also this wider conception of God's name, but he did not; instead, he actually spoke of it as the true goal of prayer for which the name was only a means.

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<sup>7</sup>"Hypostasis" is a technical term to designate a person of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit).

And Ilarion did not advocate paying special attention to the name "Jesus" by itself: in *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* that name occurs alone exceedingly rarely, and then usually in references to other sources that had used it that way. Ilarion spoke of his own practice of contracting the Jesus prayer to "Lord Jesus Christ" after many years (and infrequently to "Jesus Christ"), but not once did he mention using "Jesus" by itself, let alone advocate it. Rather, what is striking about his book is that "Jesus Christ" is used consistently as if it were one indivisible name.

Besides such misrepresentations the review is remarkable for its sharp tone. Khrisanf exclaims "How he reinterprets everything to suit himself!" and "This is something abnormal!" He calls Ilarion's views "idle-minded thought," "idle-minded innovation," "absurdity," and "extreme audacity". Ilarion errs because he "is guided only by his own opinion" and is in an "abnormal spiritual and mental condition," and he expresses himself "peculiarly and senselessly" and "thoughtlessly".

The review's tendentiousness suggests ulterior motives in its composition, and it turns out that evidence for such motives does exist. Apparently Ilarion maintained some ties with Mt. Athos after leaving, and among those to whom he sent the first copies of his new book asking for comments was one Agafodor, an elderly monk in a powerful position among the leadership of St. Panteleimon's monastery. It was this Agafodor who sent the book on to Khrisanf suggesting he write a review, and who collaborated with him on it. As for why Agafodor disliked the book's author, the contemporary historian Kosvintsev gives background information:

... several years before in Russia a "mother Natalya" had become famous for her clairvoyance. When this "seer" lived in Petrograd, poor and millionaires, simple bourgeois and dignitaries in gold-embroidered uniforms all went to see her for "grace". Natalya "prophesied" to all in the name of the Mother of God, whom she supposedly saw constantly before her eyes. And then, when Natalya came to Jerusalem, one of the highest Russian monks of St. Panteleimon's Athonite monastery came there and asked from the "seer" prayers that he be granted grace. When Natalya was returning to Jerusalem, the ship on which she was sailing stopped near Athos, and the aforementioned monk with many other monks appeared on the ship and prostrated themselves before Natalya. But soon she was exposed by one of the Russian monk-hermits as fallen into *prelest'*. And from that time her aura of clairvoyance left her. (142)

In one of the letters printed in the third section of *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* Ilarion responds to a request for an opinion about Natalya (written before she was "exposed") and reproaches his

correspondent for dishonoring the Mother of God by believing she would act in such a way. A sample of his comments:

You, of course are guilty for having light-mindedly believed extreme absurdity, and by that you revealed not only the absence in you of spiritual reason but also that you are completely without the gift of discerning "spirits," i.e., the spirit of truth and the spirit of deception ... (311)

All of the names in this letter, even Natalya's, were replaced with "N." as was done in all of the personal letters printed in the book, but Agafodor undoubtedly found these words offensive -- for it was he who had not only traveled to Jerusalem to venerate Natalya but had also gone to prostrate himself before her when her ship stopped at his monastery. Hence he sought to return Ilarion's compliments.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Controversy Develops**

Whatever the underlying causes for Khrisanf's review, it incited open quarreling about the significance of God's name, particularly the name "Jesus," among the monks of Mt. Athos. The strife was worst at the skete of New Thebaide, a dependency of St. Panteleimon's, where the monk Aleksey Kireyevsky actively propagated the views expressed in the review. A typical episode:

... he visited one ascetic, a doer of the Jesus prayer, on his names day. The hermit treated him hospitably with what he could, and then while conversing with the hermit Fr. Aleksey began to speak about the Jesus prayer [and] about the book of Fr. Ilarion, and daringly expressed the following opinion: "Well, what is the name of Jesus, that Fr. Ilarion ascribes such importance to it in the Jesus prayer? ... a simple human personal name, just like other human names." These words vexed the pious monk, upset him, and he asked Fr. Aleksey to leave him and go away from his cell. (*Моя Борьба* 653)

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<sup>8</sup>One wonders why Ilarion sent his book to a monk whose response shows that they were not on the best of terms, and if he knew about Agafodor's dealings with Natalya. If so, the inclusion of that letter in his book and the sending of the book to him might have been prompted at least in part by a personal grudge similar to what prompted Khrisanf's review. It is highly irregular for a monk to permanently leave his monastery; Agafodor being in a position of authority at St. Panteleimon's, it could be that Ilarion had left after living there for 20 years due in part to bad feelings between them. These must remain only conjectures, however, for there is no evidence to support any of them.

Reliable details on the course of these early verbal quarrels are not to be found, but a general outline can be reconstructed. Because of Fr. Aleksey's making light of the name "Jesus," some monks began to view him as (and probably to call him overtly) a blasphemer and a heretic. Consequently some refused to receive his priestly blessings or to serve Divine Liturgies along with him. When both parties complained to Abbot Misail of St. Panteleimon's he took no action against Fr. Aleksey but did take disciplinary measures against those who were refusing to have anything to do with him. Some he deprived of the sacraments for periods of from one to three years, others who were priests he prohibited from officiating at services for similar lengths of time, and others he reassigned to less desirable jobs. Some were apparently even obliged to leave the skete altogether or left as a result of the other disciplinary measures. Fr. Misail was not necessarily taking sides in the developing controversy at that point, however; his actions were probably intended just to promote peace and harmony among the brotherhood. Perhaps he chose the course of action he did because Fr. Aleksey's offenses were in word only while the others' were in deed -- but precisely because the peace-keeping measures did not include restraining Fr. Aleksey from speaking his views freely, peace and harmony were not forthcoming.

That the quarrel was so difficult to stop was due in part to factors other than theology and personal grudges. Aleksey was a son of wealthy land-owners (said to be a nephew of the famous Kireyevsky slavophiles) and had attended the Moscow Theological Academy. The monk Theofan, a hermit who actively advocated Khrisanf's views much like Aleksey did, was a graduate of the Kazan Theological Academy. Khrisanf had a university education. In general their side in the dispute was taken by monks with higher educations, often from wealthy and privileged families -- and consequently often holding positions of authority in the monastic communities -- while their opponents were simple peasant sorts. So to some degree long-standing tensions between the two groups merely took on a new form in this debate. Since the "intelligentsia" tended to look down on those they called "lapotniki" and "muzhiki" (derogatory terms for "peasants") and despised their opinions as worthless, real dialogue and understanding between the two groups was impossible.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Later reports of political factors (peasant-monarchists vs. intelligentsia-democrat/socialists) and ethnic rivalries (Little-Russians vs. Great-Russians) seem to be entirely spurious.

Economic factors may also have played a minor role. Since much of the income of Athonite monasteries came from donations of wealthy pilgrims, any improvement in the reputation of the Caucasus vis-a-vis Athos as a place where pilgrims could find holy startsy could cause the pocket-books of Athonite monasteries to suffer. And of course some residents of Athos might resent any relative lessening of the Holy Mountain's unique reputation just for the sake of Athonite glory, entirely aside from financial considerations.

Nevertheless, the importance of these peripheral factors should not be exaggerated; the dispute was basically a theological one. It continued for several years, remaining limited primarily to personal quarrels among the monks of New Thebaide. When the second edition of *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* appeared in 1910 Ilarion included a response to Khrisanf's review, but this apparently had little effect on the course of a controversy which seemed to be on its way toward dying a natural death. Then in 1912 something did affect the course of the controversy and gave it a new lease on life: Khrisanf's review was finally published.

That event came about because Aleksey and Theofan happened to be friends of the powerful Russian archbishop Antony Khrapovitsky (1864-1936). Abp. Antony was born to a well-to-do family and rose through ecclesiastical ranks of authority remarkably quickly: he graduated from the St. Petersburg Theological Academy at age 21, was tonsured a monk at 22, became rector of the Moscow Academy at 27, of the Kazan Academy at 31, and was consecrated a bishop in 1900 at 37 years of age. By 1912 he was archbishop of Volynia and a member of the ruling Synod of the Russian Church. There he became so powerful that in 1912 subscriptions to the monastic journal *Russkiy Inok* (Russian Monk), which he had established less than three years before, were made obligatory for all Russian monasteries.

Aleksey had become close to Abp. Antony as a student at the Moscow Academy, Theofan at Kazan. The former wrote to him complaining about difficulties with his fellow monks at New Thebaide and sent along a copy of Khrisanf's review. Though Aleksey made no request that it be published in *Russkiy Inok*, Abp. Antony decided to do so -- and suddenly a controversy that until then had been the subject of private discussion and argument in relatively limited circles was spread to every Russian monk who could read or knew someone who could. Monks who were scandalized by Aleksey's verbal belittling of the name "Jesus" suddenly saw those blasphemous and heretical views propounded by a powerful archbishop. Those inclined to speak like Fr.

Aleksey but who had not before seen Khrisanf's review suddenly had more ammunition with which to provoke the simple and pious. And Abbot Misail of St. Panteleimon's monastery was emboldened or even made to feel duty-bound to use stronger disciplinary measures against those who were ostracizing Aleksey -- which led only to their more widely propagating throughout the Holy Mountain tales of blasphemy, heresy, and repression at New Thebaide.

Khrisanf's review appeared in three consecutive February and March, 1912 issues of the bi-monthly journal. An introduction by the editor informed readers that:

Bishop Antony has affirmed that *it is necessary to print in Russkiy Inok* the review or commentary about the book *Na Gorakh Kavkaza*, i.e., in other words the bishop recognizes the commentary of the Athonite about the book of Fr. Ilarion correct, and the book *Na Gorakh Kavkaza* incorrect and for monks *useless*. (4:70)

Shortly after its publication Fr. Ilarion sent a defense of his position to Abp. Antony, but the latter refused to print it for reasons he himself explained in a short "letter to the editor" printed in a May issue of his magazine:

The author's defense is not at all substantial: he writes about the usefulness of the Jesus prayer, but this doesn't touch upon his divinizing the name Jesus. He writes about the holiness of God's names, but this speaks against an exceptional power of the name Jesus ... The very name Jesus is not God, for J. Nave and Jesus the son of Sirach and High Priest Jesus the son of Josedek were also named Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Are they really also Gods? The author's communication that many who have read the criticism of his book have stopped using the Jesus prayer is either an invention (because people have always been using this prayer who have not shared the author's superstitions) or highly comforting -- if those have stopped using it who united with it absurd superstition and consequently were using the prayer while in *prelest'*. (10:62-3)

The "anger" of Ilarion and his followers as seen in their treatment of Aleksey is adduced as evidence that they themselves are in *prelest'*.

That Ilarion did not defend a special "divinization" of the name "Jesus" in particular, much less as a combination of letters abstracted from all meaning, is not surprising -- for that position

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<sup>10</sup>The Old Testament names rendered "Joshua" in English Bibles are spelled the same as "Jesus" in Russian Bibles, actually a more accurate rendering since they are the same name. The English Bibles suggest a difference in these names which does not really exist.

was entirely a creation of Khrisanf's review. But Archbishop Antony could not know this because he had not even read *Na Gorakh Kavkaza*. He had printed the review condemning that book in his journal; he had given the review his personal approval as being truthful and reliable; he had refused to print Ilarion's defense; and then he had printed this scathing reply in place of it -- all without even reading the book. Only in October of 1912 did he finally do so.<sup>11</sup> After nine months of frequent and virulent public condemnations that process will have been largely a formality; not only was the archbishop's mind already made up, but to change his position would have been extremely embarrassing. He didn't.

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<sup>11</sup>By his own admission; see Новое лжеучение 872, also Булатович, Апология IX and Ивольгин, Об Афонском Волнении.