

# INTRODUCTION

## **The Historical Setting**

On July 3, 1913 some four hundred monks of the Athonite monastery of St. Panteleimon fled to one of their dormitory buildings and set to work barricading the entrances with bed boards. Bayoneted rifles in hand, sailors of the Russian Imperial Navy surrounded the building while their officers exhorted the unarmed monks to give up peacefully. To no avail. Prepared for martyrdom but hoping in God's help, the monks sang, prayed, did prostrations, and took up icons and crosses to defend themselves. Finally the trumpet rang out with the command to "shoot," and the calm of the Holy Mountain was rent by the roar ... not of firearms, but of fire hoses. After an hour-long "cold shower" dampened the monks' spirits, the sailors rushed the building and began to drag recalcitrant devotees of the contemplative life out of the corridors.

These events took place on a narrow peninsula in northern Greece some forty miles long by five miles wide, named "Mt. Athos" after the 6,000 foot mountain towering over the end of it. Since the tenth century this stretch of land has been set aside for the exclusive use of Eastern Orthodox monks, a status instituted by the Byzantine Empire and maintained by the Turks after they conquered it in 1453. Though located in Greece it eventually became an international center for Orthodox monasticism, and the nineteenth century saw such a mass immigration of Russians that by the beginning of the twentieth the mountain was really more Russian than Greek. That situation was not to last long, and the events narrated above marked the beginning of the end. In 1913 the Russian government forcibly expelled more than eight hundred of its own citizens from Mt. Athos, and these were followed in succeeding months by as many as one thousand more who would have been expelled had they not left voluntarily.

Their crime: disagreeing with the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in a controversy about the phrase "The name of God is God himself". The Synod's show of force was intended to end the debate and extort at least tacit agreement from its opponent -- but it

accomplished neither. Rather, it was but one of many turning points in a long theological dispute whose course was more often determined by politics and personal grudges than by theology. The history of this controversy is a fascinating one in its own right, but at the same time it provides insight into the inner workings of the Russian Orthodox Church. This practical value of that knowledge should not be underestimated -- the Russian church at that time was no different from the other Orthodox churches, and the Orthodox churches of today do not operate any differently. Today's Orthodox hierarchs don't have armies at their command, but they and their willing minions often use what power they do possess in the same way as their predecessors described in these pages. Besides that, this is an excellent illustration of how the Eastern Orthodox Church has always resolved -- or failed to resolve -- its theological issues. And last but not least, the debate reproduced herein can help clarify the Orthodox understanding of an issue fundamentally important for Christian theology.

### **The Theological Background**

In the Old Testament the word we translate "name" is closely related to the one we translate "soul," and both mean something quite different from their common English usage. The ancient Hebrew "soul" is the essence of an animate being, not necessarily just of a human being; God is also a soul and even animals are souls. You can therefore even speak of "dead souls". "Soul" designates the totality of the person. And so does "name," as an eminent Hebrew scholar explains: "It is to be understood quite literally that the name is the soul ... the heritage consisting in the name is not an empty appellation, a sound, but the substance of a soul ... The name immediately calls forth the soul it designates; therefore there is such a deep significance in the very mention of a name." (Pederson 1:245, 254, 256)

When the name mentioned and the soul called forth is God's, one is assured of divine action. "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you." (Ex 20:24) "Whoever calls on the name of Yahweh shall be saved." (Jl 2:32) Therefore the divine name must be treated with great respect: "You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain." (Ex 20:7, Dt 5:11) Blasphemy against the name is an extremely serious offense

punishable by stoning. (Lv 24:16)<sup>1</sup> Even forgetting the name is a terrible sin: woe unto those "who think to make my people forget my name ... even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal." (Jer 23:27; see also Ps 44:20) And even the very mention of the names of other Gods is to be avoided: "Make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let such be heard out of your mouth." (Ex 23:13; see also Jos 23:7, Hos 2:17)

The realism with which the name of God is conceived is often striking. The priests are to bless the people of Israel by "placing on them" God's name. (Nm 6:27) The name itself comes to execute judgment: "Behold, the name of Yahweh comes from afar, burning with his anger ..." (Is 30:27) It acts: "The name of the God of Jacob protect you!" (Ps 20:1) It is a place of refuge: "The name of Yahweh is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." (Prv 18:10; see also Zep 3:12) It dwells in the tabernacle, later the temple, which is "the place which Yahweh will choose to make his name dwell there." (Dt 16:2; see also 12:11, 14:23, 16:6,11, 26:2, Is 18:7, Ps 74:7) The temple was in fact built specifically to be "a house for the name of Yahweh." (1 K 8:17; see also 3:2, 8:20, 27, 29)

Consequently, "to know the name of Yahweh" implies much more than knowledge of a particular combination of letters. Several Psalms suggest that only the righteous know God's name. (9:10, 91:14) And although Genesis 4:26 states that, "At that time men began to call upon the name of Yahweh," much later this very name is revealed to Moses as if it were not known before. (Ex 3:13-15; cf. 6:2-3) Still later Isaiah promises that Israel will come to know God's name in the future, implying that it was still not known, or not fully known. (52:6)

The same theme continues in the New Testament, where Jesus says, "I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world ... I have made known to them your name, and I will make it known ..." (Jn 17:6, 26) Here too, the implication is that the name is at once known and yet not known. Despite the entire Old Testament history, it is Jesus who reveals God's name. (See also Rv 19:12-13)

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<sup>1</sup>In later Judaism, veneration of the divine name reached such heights that it came to be considered unpronounceable except in very special circumstances by priests. The Hebrew scribes could not even bear to write a passage where the name of God was insulted by someone else, so in such cases they actually changed the text; e.g., where Job's wife says, "Curse God and die!" all extant Hebrew manuscripts now read "Bless God and die!" (Jb 2:9)

What is especially remarkable in the New Testament, though, is that all of the wonderful attributes formerly ascribed to the divine name "Yahweh" come to be attributed to the name "Jesus". Its mention is an absolutely reliable assurance of divine action: "Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you." (Jn 16:23; see also 14:13, 14; 16:24, 26) Not only does the believer find "life in his name" (Jn 20:31), but this life is not to be found anywhere else since "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Jesus' name is placed on an even footing with the Holy Spirit as the effective agent in baptism: "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6:11) And as did the name of Yahweh, this name itself acts: "And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong ..." (Acts 3:16) To suffer for the faith is to suffer "for the name" (Acts 5:41, 9:16, 15:26, 21:13), just as faith itself is "in the name" of Jesus Christ (Jn 3:18, Acts 3:16, 1 Jn 3:23). The honor due to this name cannot be overestimated: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ..." (Phil 2:9-10)

Hence the name of Jesus has played a central role in Christian spirituality, particularly in prayer, from the beginning. And when monasticism arose in the fourth century with its devotion to literal fulfillment of all of the gospel's commandments, including those to "unceasing prayer" (1 Thes 5:17, Lk 18:1, Eph 6:18), that central role became even more prominent.

One way to make prayer "unceasing" was to persistently repeat a short formula, usually consisting of a simple cry for "help" or "mercy". Jesus' warning against "vain repetition" (Mt 6:7) was understood not to apply to repetition per se but rather to doing so "vainly". Indeed, he himself taught his disciples to repeat the "Our Father". But for many circumstances something simpler than the Lord's Prayer was needed, something easily recited even while one was occupied by other tasks, yet expressing what needed to be expressed. Initially the formulas chosen varied from the ultimate in simplicity such as "Lord help" or "Lord have mercy" to somewhat longer variants such as Ps 70:1: "Make haste, O God, to deliver me!" But gradually one formula gained ascendancy. It was apparently influenced by the short cries for help people make to Jesus in the Gospels, particularly that of a certain blind man who attains his healing precisely through persistence in repeating one phrase -- "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." (Lk 18:38; see also Mk 10:47, Mt 20:31) Also of some influence was the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, wherein

Jesus praises the publican who prayed simply, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." (Lk 18:13) The formula that became the standard by the thirteenth or fourteenth century contained elements of both of these with a few changes making Christian doctrine more explicit: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (sometimes without "a sinner"). It came to be known as the Jesus prayer.<sup>2</sup>

That title itself identifies the most vital element, the *sine qua non* of the prayer. Yet the other names "Lord," "Christ," and "Son of God" were also of great importance in that they identified more precisely the "Jesus" addressed and at the same time made of the prayer a confession of faith. As for the nature of the prayer's request, the attitude of contrition it emphasized arose from and was especially appropriate to the monastic milieu -- but at the same time it could also be understood in a wider sense. "Mercy" is sometimes taken to refer merely to the lessening of punishment due to an offender, but the Greek ἐλεῖν (to have mercy) can also mean simply "to be good to" or "to be gracious to," particularly in a Christian context because of the way it is used in the Greek Old Testament. Hence "have mercy" could be construed also as a request for "help" and "deliverance" -- and ultimately for all that is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

So the Jesus prayer was both simple and comprehensive. It was at once a confession of faith and a request for all that one could ask for. And thanks to its simplicity one could use it constantly even while engaged in manual labor as monks often are. The prayer eventually gained such general acceptance that it even found its way into the official rite of monastic tonsure, where it was and is commended to the new monk as a way of life. On the other hand, not only monastics could find this prayer useful, and with the publication in the eighteenth century of the *Philokalia*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>To my knowledge the best presentation of the historical and theological background to this prayer is Irene Hausherr's *The Name of Jesus*. For briefer presentations oriented more toward practical aspects of its use and written by Eastern Orthodox authors, see Ware, *The Power of the Name* and Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*.

<sup>3</sup>A collection of writings of various church fathers from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries focusing on methods of monastic spirituality, preeminently the Jesus prayer.

and in the nineteenth of *The Way of a Pilgrim*,<sup>4</sup> the Jesus prayer was on its way to becoming a nearly universal standard in Eastern Orthodox spirituality for monastics and non-monastics alike.

Over the years many Orthodox Christian writers advocated this formula and explained its usefulness in a variety of ways. Some pointed out that since anyone can say it anywhere and anytime, it makes possible truly unceasing prayer. Others noted that its simplicity facilitates shutting all other thoughts out of the mind save one -- the thought of God. Some suggested that as a call for mercy it can help keep alive one's awareness of being a sinner in need of mercy and can thereby help to develop and maintain the publican's attitude which was so praised by the Lord. Many emphasized its saving significance as a confession of faith, recalling texts like St. Paul's "with the mouth is confessed unto salvation." (Rom 10:10)

And many stressed the vital importance of the divine name. The scriptural understanding of the power of Jesus' name was echoed in patristic writings throughout the history of the Christian Church, had directly influenced the very development of the Jesus prayer, and was explicitly referred to in numberless treatises written about that prayer. And yet one could always assert that some aspects of the divine name's significance could still be explored in more depth. Doing so might have to involve the use of phrases and expressions rarely seen before, but that would not necessarily imply the invention of a different belief or "dogma". One could reasonably argue that such new phrases and expressions simply clarify in a new way the same basic belief held by all Christians from the beginning. This was the stand taken by one monk named Ilarion around the beginning of the twentieth century when he offered some new explanations of his own. His critics saw something sinister in his "new phrases," however. They felt he was not merely explaining what had always been implicit but was rather introducing something new and therefore false. The result was a theological controversy that degenerated to accusations of heresy, excommunications, fist-fights, "blockades" of monasteries, and attacks by armed soldiers upon unarmed monks. All due to one or two simple, but to some people scandalous, phrases.

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<sup>4</sup>By now considered a classic even outside of Russia, this is the story of a person who wandered around the Russian countryside seeking to fulfill the Apostle's command to "pray unceasingly" -- and found the answer in the Jesus Prayer.