

The Philokalia and the Inner Life: on Passions and Prayer

by Christopher C H Cook

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Book Review by Professor Andrew Sims

Within the membership of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group (SPSIG) the consensus appears to be that prayer exists and is, in general, 'a good thing', beneficial to all involved. That being so, *The Philokalia and the Inner Life* will be of interest to those in the SPSIG, not only because the author is our chairman, and a psychiatrist specializing in the addictions, but also because it intersects with many aspects of our everyday clinical work. It is a theological work which is also manifestly psychiatric.

Probably, like me before I read this book, you have never heard of the *Philokalia*, and its content will be strange, almost alien. The *Philokalia* is an anthology of spiritual writings from the Eastern Christian tradition, written from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries – the word means 'love of the beautiful'. The English translation comprises 62 books by about 40 authors. Such a compilation is enormously variable in every aspect except the common thread of directing the life of the soul towards God: 'towards the goal of... mental well-being and the shepherding of thoughts'. A recurring theme is how to focus and control thought life and the train of thought. What is meant by 'thought' and 'thoughts', and how the *Philokalia's* usage differs from our meaning, Cook considers in detail. The other concept which is vital for understanding is 'Passion', or 'passions'; again, a millennium of thought processes away from any meaning we would give to these words.

Cook begins with an interesting and detailed chapter on how the *Philokalia* came into existence within Orthodox Christianity: its influences and foundations. Texts of the Eastern Church on 'inner quietness' through prayer, that subsequently comprised *Philokalia*, cover a huge span, temporally, geographically and in substance; they were collected and edited by Nikodimos and Makarios in a single work of four volumes in the 18th century. The final work, greatly moulded by two of the contributors: Evagrius and Maximus, is concerned throughout with the immanence and transcendence of God. The Old and New Testaments and the Desert Fathers are the major influences, and, to a lesser extent, the Classical Greek tradition; western ecclesiastical influences do not feature.

Chapter 2 is concerned with 'The Passions'. Here I, as a psychopathologist, was in difficulty. Superficially, 'passions' can be compared with what we understand as 'emotions' but, whereas I would see emotions as the driving force for action, the *Philokalia* generally consider passions as passive experience. In the classical tradition, passions were often equated with disobedience to reason; the desert fathers saw them as external temptations. In the *Philokalia*, passions are generally bad, a form of temptation, and approximate to pathology of the soul. 'The passions

represent a rich and complex understanding of the inner life of human beings which goes a long way towards providing a robust psychological framework for understanding the struggle for virtue.'

Remedies for the Passions, Chapter 3, include a practical life of asceticism and virtue, 'watchfulness' (an attitude of attentiveness, watching one's inward thoughts), psalmody and prayer. Each one of these Chris Cook explores with psychological insight. The emphasis on 'psalmody' as an adjunct to spirituality struck a chord with a music lover brought up in the hymn-singing tradition. Highly significant is the 'Jesus prayer' Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' Passions are enslaving; the remedies bring freedom for the soul.

Although the *Philokalia* 'provides a pharmacopoeia of remedies for the passions', the goals of treatment are very different from modern psychotherapy. Mental Well-being (Chapter 4) had much more to do with the state of the soul before God than any subjective state of happiness or satisfaction. Sometimes this pursuit of spiritual well-being comes over to us as quite extreme; for example, the notions of 'deification' or 'perfection' are quite alien to our thinking. Chris Cook rightly advises 'that (in this world at least) great caution should be exercised against assuming that final perfection has been achieved...' He sees *hesychia*, stillness, as the basis for the health of the soul. *Hesychia* is about the 'relationship towards God, as much as, if not more than, being anything to do with tranquillity and concentration.' *Blessedness* is another source of well-being in the *Philokalia*; it is to be understood as 'the same thing' as the kingdom of heaven. The beatitudes in the Gospels are often quoted, and many new 'blesseds' are added. The 'already but not yet' character of blessedness (like the kingdom of heaven) is emphasised by portraying life on earth as a foretaste of eternal blessedness. Each beatitude becomes 'blessed' when an action or state is undertaken or entered 'for the sake of Christ'. The *Philokalia* is concerned with the well-being of the inner life; it makes a surprising but relevant contribution to the current debate, provoked by our Government, on happiness.

The teachings and recommended practises of the *Philokalia* are compared with modern psychotherapy (Chapter 5). In the section on Soul and Self, I wondered if Jaspers would not have been more fruitful for comparison than Freud. Cook draws out fascinating parallels on such topics as *heart*, *mind*, *inwardness* and *commitment*: fundamental for the individual, the Church and society. Cook quotes Gregory Palamas: 'No one has ever supposed that the mind resides in the finger-nails or the eye-lashes... But we all agree that it resides within us... We know very well that our intelligence is neither within us as in a container – for it is incorporeal - nor yet outside us, for it is united to us; but it is located in the heart as in its own organ.' The outstanding difference between conventional psychotherapy and the remedies of the *Philokalia* is that whereas psychotherapy is a 'talking cure', the latter is a 'praying cure'.

There is an inextricable link between thoughts and prayer (Chapter 6); the authors and editors of the *Philokalia* show keen psychological awareness and it is serious about both the difficulties and the centrality of prayer in everyday life; evil thoughts are equated with those that distract us from prayer. However, each of the remedies for the passions involves thought, and so thoughts are part of the solution, as well as the problem. Some of the discussion on evil thoughts and what should be done

about them may be quite foreign to us, for example, the notion that banishing all thought from prayer becomes 'pure' prayer – a sort of light without image or thought. I find parallels with modern cognitive techniques more convincing than with dynamic. The *Philokalia* is ambivalent about dreams but recognizes that they are influenced by sources external to the soul. Throughout, the *Philokalia* teaches that thoughts are powerful; they have the capacity to enslave and to deceive, and to set free and heal. The ultimate aim of the *Philokalia* is to facilitate prayer and the growth of the inner life.

If, on reading this, you feel you understand both the *Philokalia* and Cook's commentary on it, then I have clearly failed in this review. If you are intrigued, then I may have succeeded. This is a profound work of scholarship and spiritual understanding that can be strongly recommended to believers of any religion or none.

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