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CHAPTER 10 [THEORY]: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Christian Explorations

Directing awareness inward to illuminate itself is a practice that has been used for centuries in various contemplative traditions in the East and the West. Within Christianity, it can be traced back to the Desert Fathers meditating in Egypt during the early centuries of the Christian church. Hesychios the Priest (seventh century), for example, a priest and monk who lived in a monastery on Mount Sinai, commented on this form of meditation in his treatise *On Watchfulness and Holiness*. A central theme of this meditation manual is attentiveness, which he defined as "the heart's stillness, unbroken by any thought." "When the heart has acquired stillness," he wrote, "it will perceive the heights and depths of knowledge; and the ear of the still intellect will be made to hear marvelous things from God." This gives rise to a unique kind of spiritual well-being.

The meditative practice of turning awareness upon itself was preserved by Greek Orthodox hermits from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. The monk Saint Symeon (949-1022), for instance, counseled aspiring contemplatives to first of all seek three things: to free themselves of all anxiety regarding both real and imaginary things; to strive for a pure conscience, with no lingering sense of self-reproach; and to be completely detached, so that one's thoughts are not drawn to anything worldly, not even to one's own body. Then, after withdrawing one's awareness from all worldly concerns, the attention is focused on one's heart and the practice continues as follows:

"To start with you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the in