

The Experience of the Spirit in Eastern Christianity*

Stephen Gero, Tübingen

The presence of the divine Spirit is an important theme throughout the biblical writings — from the Spirit of God which is, in the first chapter of the book of Genesis, described as hovering over the waters of the abyss to the appearance of the Spirit and the Bride, calling for the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus, at the end of the book of Revelation. But it is a difficult task to order the rich biblical material and to trace the subsequent development of the idea of the Spirit in Christian thought. In some ways theological reflection about the Spirit can be compared to a powerful underground current, which only occasionally surfaces. »One reason for this cryptic quality may be found in a certain vagueness, which attaches to the conception of the Spirit, linguistically, imaginatively and theologically«.¹ In particular, one should note the basic dichotomy between the Spirit appearing on the one hand as a distinct person, as an individual and on the other as an impersonal force or influence, an ambiguity which marks all the material, biblical and post-biblical. The following remarks can hardly dispel the vagueness, the mysteriousness inherent to this topic; they are merely intended to draw attention to some pertinent aspects of the history of Christian thought, to moments when the underground stream briefly surfaces, and the idea and more generally the experience of the Spirit become articulated, central issues. Attention will be furthermore focused on material drawn from the theological traditions of the eastern churches, rather than those of western Christianity — not only because the eastern material has the inherent interest of the less familiar, but also because in certain ways the role played by the Spirit is more pivotal in the theology and the liturgical life of the oriental churches than it is in the West.

The various clues about the Spirit found scattered in the New Testament writings were somewhat neglected by the systematic thinkers of the early Christian centuries, though, paradoxically, Spirit-inspired prophecy occupied a central place among certain Christian groups, the leaders of which on occasion even claimed to be the embodiment of the Paraclete, or of the Holy Spirit itself. Yet the question of the relation of the Spirit to God was continually posed to every generation through the baptismal formulas, commencing with the triadic injunction in chapter 28, at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew — »Go . . . make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit«, baptismal creeds which incapsulated and transmitted to new church members the essentials of Christian belief. It was only relatively late, in the

* This is a revised and expanded version of a lecture delivered at Southwest Missouri State University (Springfield, Missouri/USA) and Reed College (Portland, Oregon/USA).

¹ Both this citation and the image of the underground stream are borrowed from *G. F. Nuttal, The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, Oxford 1947, p. 3.

fourth century, as a sequel and pendant to the controversy about the divinity of the Son and the relation of his nature to that of the Father, that the question whether the Holy Spirit is also divine was directly addressed. Earlier creeds left the matter simply open — even the official creed of the council of Nicaea which proclaims the divinity of the Son merely demands an auxiliary »belief in the Holy Spirit«, without elaboration. The divine nature of the Spirit, in the context of the Trinity, is defined in a later conciliar decision, the so-called creed of the council of Constantinople — this is incidentally a truly ecumenical creed, still admitted as normative by the Greek Orthodox, by the Roman Catholic church and by the major Protestant denominations alike. The pertinent passage runs as follows: »We believe in the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of the life, who proceeds from the Father, who is jointly worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, who spoke through the Prophets«. The details of the theological controversy, with political dimensions, leading up to this and affiliated dogmatic definitions, cannot detain us here.² The debate itself was carried out for the most part in very philosophical terms, by theologians thoroughly trained in Aristotelian thought, employing technical distinctions of nature, person, substance and so forth; it finally resulted in the formulation, around the end of the fourth century, of the Trinity as three divine persons sharing the same substance. A very philosophical formulation — yet the point of departure and the constant irritant, so to speak, was the presence of the Spirit, in the liturgical life of the church, of the Spirit being invoked and addressed in ritual and prayer.

Although the personality of the Spirit was in principle stressed by the champions of orthodox trinitarianism, they were hard put to assign a sphere of activity exclusively or even primarily to the Spirit. Distinctions rather came to be elaborated in terms of relations internal to the Trinity; the eternal *begetting* of the Son from the Father, the eternal *procession* of the Holy Spirit from the Father. It was one aspect, one elaboration of this last point which later, in the Middle Ages came to be a major cause for the permanent schism between the two major Christian communities, the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox. The Latins added the qualification that the Holy Spirit proceeds also *from* the Son (in Latin *filioque*, hence the name of the controversy in textbooks of the history of doctrine); the Greek theologians insisted on the older formulation, *through* the Son. Though the difference of the two formulations may strike one as minute and academic, it does reflect divergent understandings of basic trinitarian relations — and, concretely and practically, it is the one solid doctrinal stumbling block to this very day between the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Still, to return to the metaphor of the underground stream, one here has the feeling that this is only a small side trickle, and one should look for the broad, deep current elsewhere!

² See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed., New York 1972, pp. 338 ff, and A. M. Ritter, *Das Konzil von Konstantinopel und sein Symbol*, Göttingen 1965, pp. 194 ff. 295 ff. on the church-historical background of the statement about the Holy Spirit in the Constantinopolitan creed. Messalian spirituality (see below, p. 7) may have played an indirect role in the formulation; so R. Staats, »Die Basilianische Verherrlichung des Heiligen Geistes auf dem Konzil zu Konstantinopel 381«, *Kerygma und Dogma* 25 (1979), 232 ff.

The wind of the Spirit, shifting metaphors, seemed to blow more freely in the non-Greek eastern churches, not so preoccupied with the Trinitarian controversy. Here in particular I am referring to Syriac Christianity, an umbrella designation for ancient Christian communities of present-day Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, communities which even today are represented by Arabic-speaking Christian minorities in these lands. The language originally employed by these oriental Christians, was Syriac, a Semitic tongue very close to the Aramaic spoken in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Only a false romanticism, however, would assert that these Syriac communities preserved the original Semitic Christianity of the primitive Christians unimpaired; but their connections to Palestine and the thought-world of Jewish Christianity were early and strong, and the Syriac theologians significantly did not get involved in the scholastic controversies of the Greeks; the situation, to be sure, changes later. Theological literature stemming from this milieu has some very intriguing archaic features, very minor in, or altogether absent from Greek and Latin theology; some of these features directly pertain to our theme of the Spirit.

There is a strong emphasis on the personality of the Spirit, resulting at times in seemingly strange statements about its bodily nature. The Holy Spirit is depicted in terms which make it appear as an angel of God, conveying or explaining divine commands to other angels. It acts as a messenger between God and man, and it is depicted as the angelic advocate of the departed before God at the time of the Last Judgment: »the Holy Spirit ... comes before Christ and stands at the door of the tombs where men are buried ... and awaits the cry of the resurrection«.³

Significantly prevalent is the employment of feminine imagery, specifically the depiction of the Spirit in maternal terms. One reason for this is surely the fact that in Syriac, as in other Semitic languages, the word for »spirit« is feminine in gender (in Greek, the language of the extant New Testament texts, the word for spirit (*pneuma*) is neuter in gender; in Latin and modern Romance languages it is masculine). Other influences may also have been at work, such as the presence of a mother goddess in triads of Father-Mother-Son in the pantheons of non-monotheistic religions of the cultural milieu of Syriac Christianity. Be that as it may, Syriac theologians felt it to be entirely appropriate to employ female metaphors. One example: »As long as a man does not take a wife he loves and honors God the Father and *the Holy Spirit, his mother* and has no other love« — but when he takes a wife, an inferior, second-rate woman, this family idyll, so to speak, is all over — a plea of course for an ascetic, celibate variety of Christianity.⁴ Another mystical text which originates from this Syrian milieu says that the human souls should cry for their »mild and heavenly Mother«, the grace of the Spirit, who will »take them in her arms of life and nourish them with spiritual and heavenly nourishment of delicious ... milk«.⁵ Philoxenus of Mabbug (6th century) describes the rebirth of the Christian in

³ *Aphrahat*, Demonstratio VI, pp. 14, ed. I. Parisot, Patrologia Syriaca I (1894), p. 296, lines 11 ff. See further W. Cramer, Der Geist Gottes und des Menschen in früh-syrischer Theologie, Münster 1979, p. 81.

⁴ *Aphrahat*, Demonstratio XVIII, 10, ed. Parisot, p. 840, lines 9 ff.

⁵ *Pseudo-Macarius*, Collection III, Homily 27, 4, 2, ed. V. Desprez, Pseudo-Macaire. Oeuvres spirituelles. I. Homélie propres à la Collection III (*Sources chrétiennes*, 275) Paris 1980, p. 324, lines 25 ff.; cf. *Pseudo-*

the water of baptism as his being born from the most maternal womb of the Spirit⁶ (here the impersonal view of the Spirit also plays a role — the Spirit as a force which permeates, cleanses, fructifies the water of the baptismal font). To be sure, the application of the metaphor of breast-feeding and more generally of the maternal imagery to the Father or alternately the divine Logos is not peculiar to Syriac Christianity — Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom also employ it.

Theologically most interesting are of course statements which bring the feminine Spirit in connection with Christ, with the latter in the subordinate position. In a fragment of a lost work called the Gospel »of the Hebrews« (that is to say, of the Jewish Christians), the Holy Spirit is said to be Jesus' *Mother*, who — in an unclear context — seized him by the hair and transported him to another place.⁷ The currency in such notions is shown by the fact that in the writings of the Mandaeans, a strongly anti-Christian ancient gnostic sect (which curiously enough still survives in Iraq) an evil, diabolic Holy Spirit (*Ruha*) is described as the mother of demons and the mother of the deluded false Messiah.⁸ In another text (the Gospel of Philip, which stems from a gnostic, heterodox Syrian milieu) the — seemingly generally admitted — femininity of the Spirit is used, in a crude polemical fashion to argue against the common Christian opinion that the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit — it is absurd that a woman (Mary) could be impregnated by another woman (the Holy Spirit).⁹ In still another Jewish-Christian work from Mesopotamia, the Book of Elchasai, the Spirit is described as not the Mother but rather the Sister of Jesus, and, like he, an angelic figure of gigantic, literally mountain-like proportions.¹⁰ We are very far here of course from the learned philosophical disquisitions of the Greek church fathers of the fourth century; the intriguing question is whether such a widespread primitive understanding of the personality of the Spirit in a provincial Semitic setting could be the survival of the beliefs of the early

Macarius, Collection II, Homily 28,4 ed. H. Dörries et al., Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios, Berlin 1964, p. 253, lines 46 ff. On the Syrian affinities of the »Macarian« corpus see G. Quispel, Makarius, Das Thomasevangelium und das Lied von der Perle, Leiden 1967, pp. 9 ff., A. Vööbus, On the Historical Importance of the Legacy of Pseudo-Macarius, Stockholm 1972, pp. 11 ff and A. Baker, Syriac and the Scriptural Quotations of Pseudo-Macarius, *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n. s. 20 (1969) 133 ff. On the vexed question of the Messalian origin or connections of these texts see Desprez, *op. cit.*, pp. 37 ff. Rather curiously in his last book the late H. Dörries, who devoted a lifetime of scholarly activity to the Macarian corpus, for all practical purposes retracts his prior firm advocacy the Messalian hypothesis (Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon, *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, phil.-hist. Klasse, 3. Folge, Nr. 105*, Göttingen 1978, pp. 12–13); the matter is obviously still *sub judice*! There are cogent grounds of any rate for supposing that the author was actually one Symeon of Mesopotamia; see W. Strothmann, Makarios und die Makarioschriften in der syrischen Literatur, *Oriens Christianus* 54 (1970) 97 n. 11.

⁶ Tractatus tres de Trinitate et Incarnatione, ed. A. Vaschalde (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri, ser. 2*, 27), Paris and Leipzig 1907, p. 118, lines 11 f. (text), p. 91 (trans).

⁷ See W. Schneemelcher (ed.), Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung ... I. Band. Evangelien, Tübingen 1987, p. 146, fragment No. 3.

⁸ See W. Foerster (ed.), Gnosis. A Selection of Gnostic Texts, vol. II, Coptic and Mandaean Sources, Oxford 1974, pp. 172, 304.

⁹ P. 55, lines 24 ff (ed. B. Layton, Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7, vol. 1, Leiden 1989, p. 150).

¹⁰ For a full presentation and discussion of the pertinent testimonia from Hippolytus and Epiphanius see now G. P. Luttikhuisen, The Revelation of Elchasai, Tübingen 1985, pp. 44, 112, 196 ff.

Christian community of Palestine, an archaic feature well-nigh washed out of the extant Greek New Testament texts.

Besides statements describing the Spirit as an individual being with personal attributes the characterization of the Spirit as an impersonal divine influence is also found in eastern Christian theology, specifically in the context of the bestowal of the Spirit as a divine gift. Genesis 2:7, which relates the creation of man and God's breathing the breath of life into him, is commonly interpreted as the Holy Spirit itself coming into man, God imparting some of his own Spirit to man, the divine Spirit functioning as the third component of the person of Adam, in addition to his corruptible human soul and body. (At times this notion is explicitly linked, in harmonizing fashion, with that of the maternity of the Spirit; thus according to the Gospel of Philip, the soul of Adam came into being by means of a breath which is synonymous with the Spirit. The Spirit given to him was his Mother. Adam came into being from *two* virgins, the Spirit and the Virgin earth.¹¹ The divinely-given Spirit did leave Adam at the Fall; the same Spirit was then restored to man through the coming of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism and Pentecost.

The burning issue in connection with this new Christian possession of the Spirit was — in some ways comparable to the Protestant quest for the assurance of salvation, in the context of the doctrine of predestination — does the Holy Spirit always stay in man, or, if the possession of the Holy Spirit is lost, how can it be recovered? One view, what one can call the lax, permissive one, represented by Philoxenus of Mabbug was that the Holy Spirit, once given to man in baptism, does not abandon him, unless he commits truly heinous sins, such as apostasy or the practice of black magic.¹² Another view, seemingly the more archaic one, was that the Holy Spirit, because of its special, literally »holy« character, cannot cohabit with evil, with sin, or even impurity. Thus the author of an early Syrian treatise on ecclesiastical regulations must combat the clearly widespread popular opinion that the Holy Spirit abandons Christian women during the period of their menstruation¹³ — a primitive (originally Jewish?) notion that the Spirit cannot abide ritual uncleanness. According to a medieval controversial tract in Ethiopic, which reflects earlier Syrian monophysite traditions, the arch-heretic Nestorius, who denied that God could be born of a woman, was brought to an open declaration of his blasphemy through the following occurrence: a woman came to church during her period of menstruation to receive communion — but it was noted by the people that the *shadow* of the Holy Spirit has turned away from her and the rays of the sun fell upon her. In this fashion her condition was betrayed and she admitted it. The patriarch Nestorius thereupon had her exposed, naked (in church?) and said: »If the Lord had been born of Mary through such a body,

¹¹ P. 70, lines 24 ff and p. 71, lines 16 ff (ed. Layton, pp. 182, 184).

¹² A. Tänghe (ed.), Memra de Philoxène de Mabbough sur l'inhabitation du Saint-Esprit, *Le Muséon* 73 (1960) 46, line 3 from bottom; trans. p. 62. An anti-Messalian intent in the exposition is quite likely; Philoxenus knew well and condemned the Messalians (see his »Letter to Patricius«, ed. R. Lavenant, *Patrologia Orientalis* 30, Paris 1963, p. 850, lines 11 ff).

¹³ A. Vööbus (ed.), The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac, vol. 2 (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 407) Louvain 1979, p. 256, lines 4 ff.; trans. Vööbus, vol. 408, Louvain 1979, p. 239.

how is it that the Holy Spirit has despised this woman?¹⁴ This is of course very crude, even vulgar polemic; but it shows the mind of the common folk. There are also more subtle and elevated expressions of the view that the Spirit is a precious but fragile possession — for instance Aphrahat says that the man who becomes entangled in the things of the world loses the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

The departure of the Spirit, for whatever reason, is of course no neutral matter. As soon as the Spirit departs, the hungry demons who have been waiting for this opportunity, immediately take possession of the man or the woman. It is such a general ideology which underlies the practice of exorcism before baptism — all pagans are inhabited by demons! The return of the Holy Spirit may be accomplished through the mediation of ecclesiastical office holders, in particular through the laying on of hands in the penitential rite — one aspect of the notion of ordered apostolic succession, of the clergy as the holder, the administrator of the apostolic charisma, of the gift of Pentecost.

Radically opposed to this »domesticated«, official understanding of the bestowal of the Spirit was the ideology of the so-called Messalian movement,¹⁶ to which we shall now turn — a popular movement, in which the individual experience of the Spirit was put squarely at the center. The word »Messalian«, Syriac in origin, means literally »the praying one«. This designation as well as other information indicates that the movement did originate in an eastern, Semitic milieu, though it did later spread to the West. (Its origins can be traced back at least to the middle of the fourth century; historical connections to still earlier »enthusiastic« movements, such as the Montanists in Asia Minor, are possible but in the present state of research hardly demonstrable). According to the Messalians (whose own preferred self-designation was that of »pneumatics«, the spiritual ones) prior to the coming of the Spirit a personal demon dwells in every man from birth, a kind of noxious parasite, a tapeworm of the human spirit. A somewhat crude notion to our tastes perhaps, but one extremely widespread in Syriac Christianity. An example of how this could be worked out is found in the Gospel of Philip: a »single« male or a »single« female (i.e. a man or woman devoid of the Holy Spirit) is susceptible to the attack of demons of the opposite sex. But when man is united to his spiritual counterpart, he is immune from attack. The Holy Spirit, a female principle is united to the (masculine) soul.¹⁷ Returning now to the Messalians themselves — each man is being devoured by his demon. What shall we do to be saved? The answer of the Messalians was not the standard one

¹⁴ G. Colin, La notice sur Nestorius du Mashafa Mestir de Georges de Sagla (Traduction), *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 50 (1984) 111.

¹⁵ So Aphrahat, *Demonstratio* VI, 17, ed. Parisot, p. 301, lines 10ff. See further Tanghe, op.cit., pp. 40–41.

¹⁶ For a quick orientation see I. W. Frank, *Die verfolgten Beter. Zu einer Pfingstbewegung in der Kirche des Altertums*, *Wort und Antwort* 16 (1975) 1 ff. and H. Chadwick, *Messalianer — en evangelisk bevegelse i det 4. århundre*, *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 50 (1979), pp. 161 ff. (an excellent survey, published unfortunately only in Norwegian). See further A. Guillaumont, art. Messaliens, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* vol. 10 (1980), col. 1074 ff. and J. Gribomont, Le dossier des origines du messalianisme, in J. Fontaine — Ch. Kannengiesser (eds.), *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou*, Paris 1972, pp. 661 ff.

¹⁷ P. 65, lines 3 ff. (ed. Layton, p. 170).

— be baptised, every one of you.¹⁸ Rather, being baptised, though not harmful, is nevertheless insufficient. Baptism, whether or not the Spirit is associated with it, does not remove, literally, the root of evil. The indwelling demon must be driven out through incessant, fervent prayer and other ascetic exercises. (The Messalians may have employed a well-known variant form of the Lord's prayer in which the petition »thy kingdom come« was replaced by the invocation »may the Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us«.¹⁹) When the demon was finally driven out, this could be perceived, the Messalians claimed, in palpable, visible fashion (images like that of smoke, a black serpent etc. are employed, the common pictorial language of ancient demonology). The subsequent coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit is also perceived in a sensible fashion — this is the key word throughout, *sensibly, perceptibly*. The Messalians' religion was a truly experiential Christianity! Can one be more precise? In some sources the coming of »the heavenly bridegroom« (the Paraclete, the Spirit) into the (female) human soul is described as producing a sensation like that of physical intercourse²⁰ — sexual imagery of the sort which is not at all uncommon in the mystical literature of East and West. After this conjunction the Holy Spirit adheres to man unseparably, and renders him impervious to demonic malice.

For the Messalians the Holy Spirit did not come in through the back door, so to speak, and its acquisition could only be the result of great personal struggle and sacrifice. But was the enthusiast, the pneumatic, now free from desire and fear? It is not easy to say — on the one hand we have reports of total abstinence, extreme asceticism, including the practice of self-mutilation, and on the other hand one finds also the more logical claim that the ascetic exercises after the coming of the Spirit are no longer necessary, and even more, that the inalienable return to the state of Adam in paradise through the renewed possession of the Holy Spirit brings with it the lifting of the legal and moral restraints which had been put upon fallen man. The spiritual man can do everything because he is freed from passion. It is hard to say where exactly the truth lies — similar accusations of theologically-justified libertinism are commonplace, directed against other heterodox groups also, in particular against the gnostics. More credible is the Messalians' reported

¹⁸ The answer, for instance, which is given by Justin Martyr; see J. E. Morgan-Wynne, »The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience in Justin Martyr«, *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984) 172 ff.

¹⁹ *Agraphon* Nr. 61 in A. Resch, *Agrapha. Außercanonische Schriftfragmente*, 2nd ed., Leipzig 1906, pp. 83–84. A liturgical origin (second century?) for this variant in Luke 11:2 is likely (so B. M. Metzger (ed.), *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, London and New York 1971, pp. 154 ff.); the arguments of R. Leaney for the other alternative, that it represents the original text of Luke (»The Lucan Text of the Lord's Prayer (Lk XI 2–4)«, *Novum Testamentum* 1 (1956) 103 ff.) are not persuasive. On the Messalians' practice of »spiritual prayer« see further A. Guillaumont, *Le témoignage de Babai le Grand sur les Messaliens, Symposium Syriacum 1976 (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 205)*, Rome 1978, p. 260.

²⁰ *Timothy of Constantinople*, *De receptione haereticorum*: PG 86, 489 C; *John of Damascus*, *De haeresibus*, ed. B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. IV, Berlin-New York 1981, p. 42, lines 21–22. For very similar (crypto-Messalian?) interpolations in one manuscript (*Athen.* 423) of pseudo-Macarius, and the condemnation of the same by a medieval orthodox scholiast as Messalian error see J. Darrouzès, *Notes sur les homélies de Pseudo-Macaire*, *Le Muséon* 67 (1954), p. 305 and H. Berthold, *Makarios/Symeon Reden und Briefe*, *Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus graecus 694(B)*, vol. 1, Berlin 1973, p. XXV.

claim that they are the »poor in the spirit« of the Sermon on the Mount, who can and should practice no almsgiving themselves, since they have renounced possessions and manual labor; rather the spiritual ones have a right to be maintained by the Christian community of the less perfect. In any case the truly revolutionary thesis was that the individual can attain his salvation free from ecclesiastical mediation and of being assured of this through his own visionary experiences. Incidentally, the superficial similarity to Protestant individualism should be put into its proper perspective — the searching of the Scriptures played, as far as we can tell, no role in the process of enlightenment.

This »charismatic« movement — to talk of an identifiable independent group or sect is probably incorrect — was perceived by church leaders as being profoundly dangerous to the established order, and it was combatted with all the means at their disposal, including harsh anti-heretical legislation and brutal inquisitorial methods. But despite all persecution the attractiveness, the seductiveness of the Messalian teachings persisted, and one can trace the survival of Messalian traits in various ecclesiastical settings, specifically in Byzantine monasticism²¹, until practically modern times.²² The revolutionary idea was not so much the notion of the indwelling demon or the interpretation of water baptism as being in some sense incomplete — in wider circles the full reception of the Spirit was linked with confirmation or some other rites. Moreover initially at least the Messalians were not any more or any less heretical in their trinitarian views than their fellow Syrian Christians, and there is no solid evidence for a kind of anti-cosmic dualism to link them to the gnostics. Rather — this bears emphasizing — it was the uncompromisingly individualistic understanding of the acquisition of the Spirit, independent of ecclesiastical rites, and the insistence that there is empirical, verifiable confirmation of this, which constituted the real challenge.

²¹ See, for instance, the synodal condemnation of the 10th-century Neo-Messalian Eleutherius of Paphlagonia, accused of advocating radical libertine practices (*G. Ficker, Der Häretiker Eleutherius, Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 79 (1906) 591ff.; *J. Gouillard, Quatre procès de mystiques a Byzance (vers 960–1143), Revue des études byzantines* 36, 1978, 8ff., 44ff.). *Gouillard* (op. cit., pp. 20ff.) would further associate the anathemas of one section of the abjuration formula edited long ago by L. von Thallóczy from *Vind. theol. gr.* 306 (»Bruchstücke aus der Geschichte der nordwestlichen Balkanländer«, *Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen aus Bosnien und der Herzegovina* 3 (1895) 298ff.; partially reedited by *Gouillard*, op. cit., pp. 52ff. on a broader manuscript basis) with the condemnation of Theodore the Blachernite (11th cent.). The text, which identified the Messalians and the Bogomils, does reproduce some late Neo-Messalian tenets (with a very graphic description of the experience of the Spirit in terms of the metaphor of pregnancy ed. *Thallóczy*, p. 368, lines 15ff = ed. *Gouillard*, p. 54, lines 27ff.), but a direct connection with Theodore, *pace* *Gouillard*, does not seem to be called for. The works of the great mystic Symeon »the New Theologian« betray the influence of Messalian terminology (see *Gouillard*, op. cit., pp. 24ff and *J. M. Hussey, The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, Oxford 1986, p. 166). The question of Symeon and Messalianism is complicated by the foisting on him of writings of the Neo-Messalian Constantine Chrysomallos (see *J. Gouillard*, op. cit., pp. 29ff and »Constantin Chrysomallos sous la masque de Symeon de Nouveau Théologien«, *Travaux et Mémoires* 5, 1973, 313ff.).

²² See *R. Staats*, »Messalianerforschung und Ostkirchenkunde«, in *W. Strothmann* (ed.), *Makarios-Symposium über das Böse. Vorträge der Finnisch-deutschen Theologentagung in Goslar 1980, Wiesbaden 1983*, pp. 47ff. and the same author's suggestive comments in: »Beobachtungen zur Definition und zur Chronologie des Messalianismus«, *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32, 4 (1982) 235ff.

This survey will be brought to a close with some observations on a particular mode of describing the presence of the Spirit, very prevalent in liturgical and devotional texts, the image of the Holy Spirit as *fire*. This is a constantly recurring metaphor, which does bring us nearer to the deep-seated roots of eastern Christian spirituality, be it what one calls orthodox or heretical; it was furthermore specifically employed by the Messalians themselves.²³ The association of fire with the Spirit is of course biblical, in particular in the depiction of Pentecost. But the image of the spiritual fire was further internalized and generalized as a *Leitmotiv* of liturgical piety.²⁴ The Holy Spirit is the warmth of the fire, the heat of the sun which loosened the tongues of the disciples at Pentecost, hitherto enveloped in the coldness of silence — little concern is shown for the miraculousness or otherwise of the gift of tongues, but rather the ability, the newly-infused will to preach the Christian message is deemed important. The fire of the Spirit permeates the water of baptism, cleanses it, transfigures it, makes it capable of bringing forth new life.²⁵ In the eucharist the Spirit is the indwelling fire, the fire of immortality. The invocation, the calling down of the Spirit at the time of the consecration of the eucharistic elements (a common feature of the eastern liturgies), transfigures these, the Spirit-fire functions as a purification and an inner force.²⁶ Sometimes in harmony with the ancient notion that the spirit resides in the blood, the eucharistic wine is identified with the Holy Spirit, but the images do coalesce — for example: »come, drink and eat the flame which makes out of you angels of fire«.²⁷

The salient aspects of the eastern Christian understanding of the Spirit as presented thus far can be summarized as follows. The Semitic genius for personification led to a predilec-

²³ The entry of the Spirit into man, after the several demons (in the shape, quite literally, of a *porca* and of *porculli*!) have been driven out, was described by Messalians as being like visible and unquenchable fire (*Augustine*, *De haeresibus*: Pl 42, cols. 40–41 = *Corpus Christianorum*, ser. latina, 46, Turnhout 1969, p. 326, lines 9 ff.). *A. Guillaumont*, *Le baptême de feu chez les Messaliens*, in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech*, Paris 1974, p. 518 interprets the rather cryptic Messalian tenet that, »fire is creator« (*τὸ πῦρ δημιουργόν ἐστιν*, *John of Damascus*, *De haeresibus*, ed. *Kotter*, p. 43, line 27) as a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the bestowal of the true baptism, that of Spirit and fire, adducing as parallels Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16. But the immediate background rather seems to be the notion of the divine fire which comes into the soul and the heart of the Christians and functions even after death as a constitutive principle for the resurrection of the body (*Pseudo-Macarius*, *Homilies* II, 1 and 25, 10, ed. *Dörries*, pp. 96, lines 1 ff.; p. 205, lines 150 ff., texts not noted by *Guillaumont*). The connection was already pointed out by *H. Dörries*, *Symeon von Mesopotamien. Die Überlieferung der messalianischen »Makarios«-Schriften*, Leipzig 1941, p. 434. On the affinity of the *πῦρ θεῖον* and the power of the Spirit see also *Pseudo-Macarius*, Collection I, *Logos* 35, 8, ed. *H. Berthold*, *Makarios/Symeon* . . . vol. 2, Berlin 1973, p. 43, lines 27 ff. See further on this theme *E. A. Davids*, *Das Bild vom Neuen Menschen. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Corpus Macarianum*, Salzburg und München 1968, p. 99 and more generally on the eschatological and creative aspects of the symbolism of fire in early Christian texts and the Stoic background cf. *W. C. van Unnik*, The »Wise Fire« in a Gnostic Eschatological Vision, in: *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, vol. 1, Münster 1970, pp. 277 ff.

²⁴ See *E.-P. Siman*, *L'expérience de l'Esprit dans l'église d'après la tradition syrienne d'Antioche*, Paris 1971, pp. 105 ff., 223 ff.

²⁵ See *E. Beck*, *Le baptême chez saint Ephrem*, *L'Orient Syrien* 1 (1956) 115.

²⁶ *Siman*, op. cit., pp. 223 ff.

²⁷ *Isaac of Antioch*, ed. *G. Bickell*, *Sancti Isaac Antiocheni doctoris syrorum, opera omnia*, pars II, Giessen 1877, p. 32 (Poem No. XXI, line 3).

tion to depict the Spirit as an individual being and in particular one equipped with maternal traits. This can be seen as a significant introduction or revival of the feminine dimension in an understanding of the Godhead otherwise dominated by male metaphors or by simply abstractions of a philosophical nature. The actuality of evil and the spiritual presence needed to overcome it were asserted, in concrete, at times all too extreme forms; but this can be seen as a needed corrective to the dominant Greek thinking, which tended to underemphasize the reality of evil. The experience of the Spirit, as far as this could be reduced to verbal categories, was conveyed in a vivid, richly symbolic language, which always pointed beyond itself.

The Holy Spirit for the eastern Christians of course has a futuristic, forward-looking dimension — and not only in the identification of the fire of the Spirit with the purifying fire of the Last Judgment, which destroys the sinners, but also in seeing it as the creative fire, through which the scattered members of the righteous departed are brought together and given new life. More generally the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of renewal, of renovation, of new beginning, I would like to close with a text, which, to my mind, makes this very graphic indeed: »when the Spirit of the world blows, winter comes — when the Holy Spirit breathes, summer appears«. ²⁸ In this particular text winter is the present, material world and summer some new aeon, the age to come. But, getting away from the immediate theological context, here as elsewhere, the Holy Spirit has been taken to be the potent, all-embracing symbol of hope, which was just as sorely needed in the ancient world as it is in our own times.

²⁸ Gospel of Philip, p. 77, lines 11 ff. (ed. Layton, p. 196). To be compared with this is the delightful description of the manifestation of the hitherto hidden glory of the Holy Spirit which transforms even the bodily appearance of the Christians, in the month of Xanthikos, April, the season both of the Resurrection and of the vernal revival of nature (*Pseudo-Macarius*, Homily 5,9, ed. Dörries, p. 61, lines 403 ff.).