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The Palamite Idea of Perichoresis of the Persons of the Trinity in the light of Contemporary neo-Palamite Analysis

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Introduction: the Problem

St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) was one of the most notable late Byzantine theologians and is often referred to as the "Thomas of the East". In 14th century Byzantium the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas created a theological controversy over Trinitarian and soteriological themes.¹ The problem behind the Palamite (and also so-called neo-Palamite) controversy is the Palamistic solution for God's simultaneous transcendence and immanence. The classical Palamite solution to this problem is to say that God's *ousia* (οὐσία) is transcendent and beyond any participation, but God's energy (ἐνέργεια) is immanent and can be participated in. According to St. Gregory, the divine energy is not a created intermediary but one of the modes of God's own existence. Therefore, the divine energy is God Himself, so that participation in the divine energy is real participation in God's own life. Some modern western researchers have said that this kind of participation "is purest Neoplatonism, an affirmation of two wholly distinct orders of reality in God."² My attention in this study is to analyse the *ousia-energeia* distinction, the cardinal dogma of Palamite theology, in the light of contemporary neo-Palamite analysis.

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Neo-Palamites – and especially Vladimir Lossky – have paid attention to existentialistic mode of thought of St. Gregory Palamas

(1296–1359). They consider that Palamas' thought itself already subsumes an "existentialistic emphasis". According to neo-Palamites, this emphasis is linked in its point of departure to both the ousia-energeia distinction and the concept included therein of God's transcendence (ousia) and participation (energeia). Thus, God is not solely ousia, an essence as such, but also energeia, a personal being, capable of expressing Himself dynamically in free personal acts.³

For reasons derived both from the history of ideology and from ecumenics, the above-mentioned contention concerning the "existentialistic emphasis" included in the theology of Palamas has risen to the forefront of interest in research. This argument has been forwarded by Lossky and by the neo-Palamites following him, such as Fr. Florovsky, Fr. Meyendorff, and Fr. Staniloae.⁴ Certain researchers salute this "emphasis", held to be quite rare in the area of Orthodox theology, but they are suspicious as to its origin. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant research on Palamas directs attention to the existentialistic features of neo-Palamite thinking, while concurrently asking whether this is of genuine Palamite origin. This line of research is represented, among others, by Dorothea Wendebourg, a Lutheran theologian, who deems neo-Palamite theology ecumenically fruitful as such, due to the "modern" features involved. Nevertheless, she calls into question its Palamite origin.⁵ According to Wendebourg, the ousia-energeia distinction, essential to Palamite theology, does not include the concept of a personal God, as Palamas understands ousia as a metaphysical principle of being, from which energeia is inferable. The above-mentioned Rowan D. Williams, an Anglican researcher to a certain degree influenced by Catholic theology, also understands Palamite theology as founded on a materialistic-physical ontology, which in his view excludes the emphasis on person characteristic of existentialistic thought.⁶ Fr. Bernhard Schultze, a Roman Catholic researcher, in turn defines real participation as being in the realm of the mental, detaching it from the physical participation which, in his view, is represented in Palamas.⁷

In light of the starting points mentioned above, both Roman

Catholic (Williams, Schultze) and Protestant (Wendebourg) research have reached the conclusion that the 14th century theology of St. Gregory Palamas cannot include a "genuine" concept of person. Therefore, the only option left open to these researchers for explanation of the existentialistic features included in neo-Palamite theology is the notion that the neo-Palamites have acquired this decisive impact on their thinking from modern existentialism. For that reason, it would appear that this existentialistic emphasis would not belong to the genuine Orthodox tradition. Furthermore, the neo-Palamites would not consequently represent authentic palamite theology in the ecumenical dialogue.

Research paradigms springing from modern existentialism have failed to yield a plausible analysis of the delineation of the relationship between the neo-Palamite concepts of person and nature. Similar difficulties arise in the interpretation of the *ousia-energeia* distinction, so essential to Palamite theology, as well as in the ecumenically significant concept of participation.⁸ As a result, the explanations proffered alternate between emphasizing either the option of "nature" or that of "person". When the principle of interpretation is the classical, i.e. Aristotelian, concept of nature, the neo-Palamite emphasis on person does not fit coherently.⁹ Furthermore, researchers utilizing this classical approach have concluded that Palamas represents a "static" ontological concept of *ousia*. In this perception, participation is primarily concerned with the linkage of the physico-materialistic to the energies emanating from the deity. Yet, modern existentialist viewpoints on the neo-Palamite concept of person fail to seriously consider the discussion of the divine nature, an area nonetheless taken for granted by the neo-Palamites themselves. It should also be noted that within modern existentialism, in which person as an epistemological principle precedes nature, person is defined in terms simply of the criticism of the classical concept of nature.

Gregory Palama's existentialistic mode of thought follows the Eastern patristic tradition, the solution of apophatic theology, where

person and nature are not polarized as there were in the modern continental thinking of the early Twentieth century. According to the this study, the issue at hand is the trinitarian mode of thought based on the apophatic thought of the Cappadocian Fathers.¹⁰ In this thought, the concept of the relation of person and nature is not established, on the whole, in the polarization of ontological vs. existentialistic.

Palama's concept of God's persons and their inner relation can best be understood on the basis of an apophatically conceived trinitarian theology and the understanding of the perichoresis of the Persons of the Trinity contained in that view.¹¹ In their interpenetration, the Persons are mutually equivalent, sharing all the attributes which may be relegated to the unknown ousia of the Deity. Therefore, it can be stated that in the Trinity neither person nor essence (nature) solely enjoys the status of an ontological principle. This idea rests on the thought included in the concept of person of the Cappadocian Fathers, i.e. that person is not an independently subsistent being, but is characterized by reciprocity and sharing.¹² An aseitic substance cannot be person. The Persons were begotten in the Trinity simultaneously; the hypostaseis are both eternally independent and divided indivisibly.

According to Palamas, it is inconceivable that the unknown ousia would precede the Persons of the Trinity as their basis or principle, and remain unknown as such. In his application of the Palamite argument that God is unknown in His ousia but recognized in His *energeia*, Palamas takes as his self-evident point of departure the concept involved in the perichoresis of person that the ousia cannot be detached from the unity of persons into a separate nature. God, anonymous in the ousia, is the mystery of the entire inner Trinity, while as the economic Trinity, God is manifest in His energies, in His activities.

From the experiential apperception, it can be explained that Palamas, as he proceeds forward from the salvatory economy, is not interested in speculation on the Trinity, but rather expresses the

activities of God's salvatory economy "in the gifts of the energies, i.e. creation, incarnation and theosis". The purpose of the ousia-energeia distinction is not to deny the presence of the Triune God in the energies, but its primary focal point is the avoidance of the Pantheistic concept that theosis would make man *in unio* into god by nature. When Palamism addresses the essence of God and the energies separately, this is the means for stating simultaneously, and thus avoiding the Pantheistic idea of fusion, that the Triune God is in entity (in His ousia) inaccessible from man's realm of knowledge and that God in entity (in His energeia or the energies) has made Himself experientially reachable.

Furthermore, as stated by neo-Palamites exegesis of Palamas, the experiential justification of the Trinity is also the point of departure for the fact that St. Gregory Palamas' theology distinguishes between two meanings of ousia, i.e. in which the relation of essence, ousia, to energeia (singular), or to the energies (plural), is discussed in two separate modes. First, the distinction between ousia and energeia is a distinction existent in God in entity (the so-called immanent Trinity), whereby essence, ousia, denotes all of God, the true essence of the Trinity, inaccessible and transcendental. Thus, the true essence of the Trinity, the unity of the ousia, is based on the unity of the energeia, and the singular use of the energeia functions as the basis of the consubstantiality of the Trinity. The origin of the energeia, as that of the ousia, is the hypostasis of the Father, in whose activity both the Son and the Holy Spirit identify themselves. In this sense of ousia, there is no particular need to emphasize persons, as the unknowable ousia means God in entity, the Trinity, not God's nature "an sich" as presented by the interpretations of Palamas arising from the background of Western theology. Secondly, the distinction between ousia and energeia explains the relation of God to the world, where the energies appear as the temporal acts of God's essence, i.e. ousia. In this sense the Trinity is unknown in its essence, but manifest in the temporal acts, or energies, of the trinitarian hypostaseis. Consequently, ousia refers to the inner struc-

ture of the Trinity ("God in Himself", the so-called immanent Trinity), whereas *energeia* refers to the outer structure ("God for us", the so-called economic Trinity). In this sense of *ousia*, the Trinity creates the world and is accessible, or as Lossky put it, will "come to abide in man" in the economic action of the Trinity, in the energies.¹³ This act by the trinitarian hypostaseis follows the order of trinitarian salvation history, i.e. from the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

The essential prerequisite to the above two meanings of *ousia* is the concept of triadic unity, where the persons on the one hand sustain nature, and on the other hand *energeia* or the energies. From the viewpoint of the concept of triadic unity, the distinction between *ousia* and *energeia* in God (i.e. the Trinity) does not sever the divine unity, as erroneously presumed in the critique of the Palamite image of God. The trinitarian model of the triadic unity, the tri-personality, as expressed in Greek patristics, is based specifically on the Greek pre-understanding of ὑπόστασις, where the hypostasis is not to be translated with the Latin word *persona*. The Greek word ὑπόστασις signifies a similarity of essence, not a unity of essence. This is seen especially in the fact that in the Palamite concept of person the Aristotelian distinction of *substantia prima* (i.e. hypostasis) vs. *substantia secunda* (i.e. *ousia*) is applied to the trinitarian *ousia-energeia* distinction in a manner which is an inversion of the Aristotelian view. When theologies based on Aristotelian philosophy consider that the *Godhead gives form to the persons*, then each person as *substantia prima* represents the Godhead as to what it is. By contrast, in Palamite thinking, the *persons give form to the godhead*. Each person of the Godhead, i.e. the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are *substantia secunda* to the essence which makes God what He is.¹⁴ The Western research on Palamas launches out from the former, i.e. the Latin, Aristotelian, meaning. Therefore, from its very inception, it leads to a variant interpretation of Palamas' concept of the Trinity. However, basing his thought on the meaning of the Greek Ὑπόστασις-concept, Palamas reaches his

understanding of ousia from the idea of the similarity of essence. This means that ousia is no longer a "static" concept in Palamas' thought, but a statement of connectedness, a relationship.

Due to the fact that the hypostasis concept so strongly emphasizes precisely the similarity of essence, then the unknown essence of God, i.e. ousia, signifies the Trinity in its entirety. The unknowableness of God is always the unknowableness of the Trinity. This observation by Lossky has such fundamental significance that the distinction between the ousia and energeia in God cannot be dealt with as a separate concept or "locus" of the Trinity, as Roman Catholic and Protestant theology have attempted to do. This emphasis does, however, require observation of the fact that Palamite theology does not contain a concept of God's essence as such (*an sich*), an idea very characteristic of Western thinking. Furthermore, it is to be noted that Palamite concept has its origins in the triadic unity pattern of the Trinity found in the Greek patristics, in which the persons are not separated from the essence, but uphold the essence. Hence, nature is not sovereign but exists always within the hypostaseis. The Godhead, i.e. the Trinity, is internally in communion.

It can, therefore, be held that the apophatically perceived perichoretic person concept also establishes, conceptively, the ousia-energeia distinction, the cardinal dogma of Palamite theology. In accordance with apophatic theology, God can then only be discussed on the level of the energies, i.e. effects. The primary cause, i.e. the triune God, and the "effect" are however not "ontologically" separable from each other. God is at the same time both unknown (ousia) and knowable (energeia). In His energies, God is also totally, i.e. as the Trinity, accessible. Even though the distinction is to be maintained between the cause, the effect, and the one or thing acted upon, all these do not form separate realities. This becomes understandable only from the viewpoint of the Palamite concept of person, where "nature" and "person" are not understood to be alternative options.

According to patristic-palamite understanding, the Persons of the Trinity are in a perichoretic and reciprocal interpenetrative relation, where one person (the person of the Father) cannot be regarded as having the status of an ontological principle from which nature (the deity) could be defined. The person of the Father is, nevertheless, the "reason" for the differentiation of the Son and the Holy Spirit, but this is true only in the sense of the differentiation of the persons and their identifiability (γνωριστικὸν ἰδιώμα).¹⁵ The Person of the Father is, however, not the cause of the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is not a causal relation in the philosophical sense, since the Persons of the Trinity exist eternally, and they exist only in perichoresis. In this perichoresis, the Persons of the Trinity sustain one deity (ousia), participating in shared action (energeia).

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- 1 About Hesychastic Controversy see *Kuhlmann* 1984; *Schultze* 1975; *Pelikan* 1974.
- 2 See for example *R.D. Williams* 1977, 38: "... to say that God's ousia is immutable and His energeiai mutable, as this drives a very considerable wedge between the two terms: what is true one 'mode' or aspect of God is not true of another. The unity of God is far more gravely imperilled by this than any Palamite or neo-Palamite seems to have grasped; it is purest Neoplatonism, an affirmation of two wholly distinct orders of reality in God."
- 3 *Lossky* 1976, 78, 82–89

- 4 See the article by *Williams* (1977, 42): "Palamism has proved an extraordinarily vigorous and fertile influence in the Eastern Christian thought of this century, and, as result, has come to occupy a privileged position within this world. However, I would argue that it has been most fruitful where it has been treated with least 'fundamentalism': in Lossky's writings, it is qualified by an impressively consistent personalism (which has evidently greatly influenced Meyendorff's presentation), the distinction between 'nature' and 'person' playing a far more significant role than that between 'essence' and 'energy', despite Lossky's ardent defence of the latter throughout his life; *and this personalist perspective is equally prominent in the work of Florovsky, Staniloae, Clement and Yannaras.*" See also *Meyendorff* 1959a, 290: "On voit ici très nettement que c'est un existentialisme chrétien que Palamas oppose à l'essentialisme nominaliste de ses adversaires. En partageant avec eux – tout au moins avec Baarlam – la doctrine de l'incognoscibilité essentielle de Dieu, il ne voit pas d'autre moyen de maintenir le réalisme biblique et patristique qu'en affirmant existentiellement la révélation du Dieu inconnaissable par des actes libres (ou 'énergies') de sa toute-puissance." See as well *Meyendorff* 1959b, 131: Ainsi, ce qui opposait Palamas à ses adversaires, c'était la philosophie essentialiste dont ils s'étaient faits les promoteurs et qui ne pouvait concevoir la réalité biblique d'un Dieu à la fois transcendant et vivant. A cette philosophie essentialiste, le docteur hésychaste opposait un personalisme existentiel. . ."
- 5 "Der Neopalamismus. . . verfiht das System des byzantinischen Kirchenvaters in einer Sicht, die von modernen personalistischen und existentialistischen Anschauungen stark beeinflusst ist. Danach trägt Palamas in seiner Energienlehre einen 'christlichen Existentialismus' vor, der *Gott als Person zu verstehen erlaubt, welche sich in 'freien personalen Akten' äussert, und setzt sich so von 'essentialistischen' Konzeptionen ab, nach denen Gott nur ein in sich geschlossenes Wesen ist.* Der Neopalamismus versucht also, die biblische Traditionslinie, die Gregors System in neuplatonistische Kategorien umgießt und zur ontologischen Erstarrung bringt, wieder herauszustellen. Ob es sinnvoll ist, dies zu tun, indem man eine Konzeption der Überlieferung gleichsam 'gegen den Strich' interpretiert, mag fraglich sein – jenes grundsätzliche Interesse jedoch verbindet die Erben des byzantinischen Bischofs mit den Theologen der Übrigen christlichen Konfessionen." *Wendebourg* 1981, 268. See also *ibid.*, 265.
- 6 *Williams* 1977, 39–44.
- 7 *Schultze* 1975, 109–110.
- 8 See *Kotiranta* 1994, 13–31
- 9 See *Lossky* 1976, 53–55, together *Ibid.*, 50, 101; *Meyendorff* 1977, 37.
- 10 See for example *De Spiritu Sancto* PG 32, 105B, *Epist.* 38:2, PG 32, 325BC; *Epist.* 134, PG 32 (Basil); *Adv. Eunom.* I.14 PG 24, 544BC, *ibid.* 545A; *ibid.* II. 24, 625B; II 28, PG 45, 244 (Gregory of Nyssa); *Orat.* 40:41, PG 36, 417BC (Gregory of Nazianzus).

- 11 See *Contra Akindynum*, V, 27.
- 12 See *Quod Non Sint Tre Dii.*, PG 45, col. 124C–D; *Ibid.*, PG 45, col. 125CD–128AB.
- 13 *Lossky* 1976, 171.
- 14 *Kotiranta* 1994, 26–28.
- 15 *Adv. Eunom.* II. 28 (637B) (Gregory of Nyssa). See also *De Fide Orthodoxa*, PG 94, 824B: 'Ἐν ταύταις γὰρ μόναις ταῖς ὑποστατικαῖς ιδιότησι διαφέρουσιν ἀλλήλων αἱ ἅγιοι τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις· οὐκ οὐσία, τῷ δὲ χαρακτηριστικῷ τῆς ἰδίας ὑποστάσεως ἀδιαιρέτως διαιρούμεναι. ("For it is only in these personal properties that the three divine Persons differ from one another, being indivisibly divided by the distinctive note of each individual Person."). See as well *De Fide Orthodoxa*, PG 94, 860B: 'Ἡ ἐν ἀλλήλοις τῶν ὑποστάσεων μονή τε καὶ ἰδρυσις ἀδιάστατοι γὰρ αὐταί, καὶ ἀνεκφοίτητο; ἀλλήλων εἰσὶν, ἀσύγχυτον ἔχουσαι τὴν ἐν ἀλλέλαις περιχώρησιν· οὐχ ὥστε συναλείφεσθαι, ἢ συγγεῖσθαι, ἀλλ' ὥστε ἔχεσται ἀλλήλων· Υἱὸς γὰρ ἐν Πατρὶ καὶ Πνεύματι· καὶ Πνεῦμα ἐν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ· καὶ Πατὴρ ἐν Υἱῷ καὶ Πνεύματι. μηδεμίᾳς γινομένης συναλοιφῆς, ἢ συμφύσεως ἢ συγχύσεως. Καὶ τὸ ἐν καὶ ταυτὸν τῆς κινήσεως· ἐν γὰρ ἐξάλμα, καὶ μία, κίνησις τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων· ὅπερ ἐπὶ τῆς κτιστῆς φύσεως θεωρηθῆναι ἀδύνατον. ("The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion. And there is one surge and one movement of the three Persons. It is impossible for this to be found in any created nature.")