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Palamism in the Twentieth Century

**An Examination of the Essence/Energies
Distinction in Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware
and Dumitru Staniloae**

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ABSTRACT

This Master's thesis will explicate, analyse and discuss the Orthodox doctrine of the essence/energies distinction in three prominent 20th century theologians, namely, Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware and Dumitru Staniloae. This is urgent because of the central position this doctrine occupies in contemporary Orthodoxy, together with the lack of precision one usually encounters when references are made to this distinction.

Methodologically, it will proceed by a careful reading of primary sources in order to explicate and clarify, in each theologian, the most important lines of thought concerning the essence/energies distinction. It will also explicate details which may affect, elucidate, or even put into question, these major lines of thought. As secondary sources, other Orthodox theologians as well as Greek Church fathers will be consulted.

Lossky and Staniloae, respectively, present rather clear visions about the relationship between God's essence and energies. As it turns out their positions are quite far from each other and, at some points, even incommensurable. Ware, on the other hand, affirms traditional and contemporary formulations, yet without providing any clear definition of his own opinion.

As regards God's energies towards creation, the opinions of the three theologians are pretty close; but regarding God's eternal energies, their differences become apparent. Lossky affirms an antinomic relationship between God's essence and energies, according to which they are mutually exclusive yet virtually identical. The essence is completely void of activity, whereas all activities are contained by the energies. Thus, even the inter-trinitarian love is outside of the essence. Staniloae affirms, on the contrary, that God's essence is identical to the divine persons and their communion of inter-trinitarian love, through which they give themselves to each other completely. Ware remains unclear about the precise character of his opinion, and it is virtually impossible to tell whether he would prefer Lossky's or Staniloae's solution.

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INTRODUCTION

Orthodox theology today is in an interesting transitional stage.¹ After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the long vibrant intellectual tradition of the Orthodox East was decimated to some degree for almost 400 years. During the 19th century there was a revival of intellectual creativity, especially in Russia.² Through the Russian theologians who were exiled in the aftermath of the Russian revolution it has spread throughout the Orthodox world.

One of the most influential of these Russian theologians is Vladimir Lossky (though he was only a student at the time of emigration). Lossky's theology took issue with the western rationalism that had affected Orthodoxy, and his creative reception of Orthodox theology in general and the Greek fathers in particular came to influence the mainstream of subsequent Orthodoxy to a large extent. He is certainly one of the most important theologians in making the Palamite doctrine of the essence/energies distinction a central doctrine universally for Orthodox theologians.

Today, however, the central position of Lossky's theological vision is questioned by an increasing number of Orthodox theologians and scholars, such as Aristotle Papanikolaou, John McGuckin, George Demacopoulos, Marcus Plested, Brandon Gallaher, Paul Gavrilyuk, David Bentley Hart, and others.³ In contrast to Lossky's attempt to define the Orthodox

¹ Cf. e.g. Gavrilyuk, "Orthodox Renaissance".

² Cf. e.g. Papanikolaou, "Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism", 527.

³ Papanikolaou, "Eastern Orthodox Theology", 544-545 (cf. "Divine Energies or Divine Personhood"; and *Being with God*); McGuckin, "On the Mystical Theology" (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; Demacopoulos,

tradition by a neo-patristic yet rather creative theological vision, which adamantly excludes some supposedly western elements, such as rationalism and suffering, a broader and more nuanced theological horizon emerges with this new generation of Orthodox theologians.

The place and interpretation of the essence/energies distinction in Orthodox theology are by no means as certain today as they were thought to be by Lossky and his followers. It has also become increasingly clear that the place and interpretation of this distinction were neither so certain in Orthodox theology even before the 20th century.⁴ But still, many Orthodox theologians today affirm “the essence/energies distinction as uniquely characteristic of and central to Orthodox theology”, as Aristotle Papanikolaou claims.⁵ Interestingly, Papanikolaou asserts furthermore that it “is difficult not to read the valorization of the essence/energies distinction in contemporary Orthodox theology as a form of self-identification vis-à-vis the West”.⁶

The need for the study

Granted that everything that differs in reality from something else differs from it conceptually as well, but not vice versa, please make it clear to us whether essence and energy differ from each other both in reality and conceptually or only conceptually, namely, only according to the mode of our mind.⁷

Thus asked Paul, Latin Patriarch of Constantinople (1366-1370), who “was troubled by the way the Orthodox Church [in the *Synodal Tome* of 1368] officially stated that there is a ‘real distinction’ between God’s ‘essence’ and ‘energies’.”⁸ His Byzantine dialogue-partner, John VI Cantacouzenos (a former emperor who had retired to the monastic life), eventually withdrew the idea of a “real distinction” (*pragmatiken diakrisin*) and replied that God’s energy only differs from the essence “conceptually [*kath’ epinoian*], in the manner that heat

“Mystery of Divine/Human Communion”, 278; Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 30 (incl. n3), 45-46, 57, 214; Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 287-291; Gavrilyuk, “Orthodox Renaissance”; Hart, “Bright Morning of the Soul”, 324-325.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”.

⁵ Papanikolaou, “Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism”, 532-533; cf. “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 357.

⁶ Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 545.

⁷ Paul, Latin Patriarch of Constantinople, in: Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 292-293 (orig. in: *First Epistle to the Emperor John VI Cantacouzenos*, II, 19-23).

⁸ Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 292.

differs from fire and shine from light”. Thus he stilled the anxiety of Patriarch Paul and Pope Urban V.⁹

However, what troubled Paul and Urban V has remained an issue even to this day, and the need for clarity is all the more urgent because of the official character that the doctrine has acquired. Even though it was proclaimed by a few local councils in Constantinople during the 14th century (1341, 1347, 1351 and 1368), the essence/energies distinction has received a wide recognition among Orthodox theologians today, who often claim that it has been received and affirmed, through history, by the entire Eastern Orthodox Church.

It seems to me that the two most pressing issues today concerning the essence/energies distinction are (1) the status of this doctrine within the Orthodox Church and (2) its professed interpretation by this Church. Because, if this doctrine is to be considered as an official dogma of the Eastern Orthodox Church, its interpretation might have great consequences for the ecumenical dialogue – and especially for the movement towards a potential eventual reconciliation with other Churches, such as the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church.

Given that some Orthodox theologians explicitly consider the essence/energies distinction to be an indispensable dogma,¹⁰ which would imply that it is binding for all Orthodox Christians, the quest for an official interpretation of this dogma is all the more urgent. Before the pan-Orthodox council of Crete, June 2016, some voices were actually raised for making this distinction a binding doctrine for all Orthodox Churches.¹¹

This Masters thesis will not discuss the status of this doctrine within the Orthodox Church, although it will record the specific opinions of the treated theologians in so far as they are explicit. Rather it will confine itself to the interpretation of the essence/energies distinction in three prominent 20th century theologians, namely, Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware and Dumitru Staniloae.

⁹ Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 293 (Cantacouzenos quote), 304 (Cantacouzenos, orig. in: *First Epistle to Paul*, 1, 13-18). According to Plested, Paul remained convinced about the faultiness of Palamite theology (Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 59-60), but from Paul’s *Epistle to the Most Blessed Pope (Urban V) and His Cardinals* (PG 154: 836A-837B), quoted by Demetracopoulos, it seems quite clear that he changed his mind after speaking to Cantacouzenos (Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 304).

¹⁰ Including Vladimir Lossky (*Mystical Theology*, 69-71) and Kallistos Ware (“Hidden and Revealed”, 136). Interestingly, Ware more recently denies that the Orthodox and Catholic Churches need to seek unity over the question of this distinction: “I don’t think that there is a fundamental difference between Orthodox and Catholics over the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas” (“Papal Primacy” [broadcast lecture], 17:44-17:58, 26:07-26:25 [quote 26:15-26:25]).

¹¹ This I learned from Andrew Louth in a private e-mail correspondence.

Gregory Palamas and the history of the essence/energies distinction

The essence/energies distinction is often traced back to Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, who claim that we *know God*, not in his essence, but *from his activities* or energies (*energeiai*). This teaching, which is quite uncontroversial, is affirmed throughout the history of the Greek fathers. However, in the 14th century it was reformulated by Gregory Palamas who rather said that we *know God's energies (energeiai)* but not his essence.¹² This way of speech aroused some uncertainty as to the ontological status of the energies – an uncertainty which has not been resolved to this day.

Even though Palamas generally is associated with the essence/energies distinction one must not forget that he was a broad theologian deeply rooted in the Greek Patristic and Byzantine tradition.¹³ He began to develop his own understanding of God's essence and energies in order to defend the practices of the holy hesychasts, which were under attack by the learned Orthodox monk Barlaam. Some of the hesychasts experienced a divine light which they claimed to be *God himself*, and this was controversial to Barlaam. As Barlaam, eventually, left the scene, other adversaries kept the controversy alive for a few decades. Thus, Palamas had to formulate and reformulate his notion about the distinction between God's essence and energies through the rest of his life.¹⁴

It is widely recognized that Palamas' assessment of the essence/energies distinction meant a development in some measure, and that it is this development that marks his most distinguished contribution to the history of theology. Indeed, the distinction was made into a doctrine through Palamas and the so called Palamite councils. Before Palamas it was never thought of as a proclaimed *doctrine*, but may only be distinguished through a systematic examination as a theological teaching or *theme*.¹⁵ However, scholars often disagree about the precise character of Palamas' contribution.

Some scholars argue that Palamas adds little or nothing to the previous Greek patristic understanding of the essence and energies of God:

¹² Demetracopoulos, "Palamas Transformed", 267-268.

¹³ Which is evident from John Meyendorff's book, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. Dumitru Staniloae, for instance, is a theologian who has received other parts of Palamas' theology, whereas he, interestingly, hardly refers to Palamas when explicating the essence/energies distinction (see the Ch. on Staniloae, below).

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Meyendorff, *Study of Palamas*, 42-113, esp. 111; Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 59; van Rossum, "Palamism and Church Tradition", 5-11.

¹⁵ For the difference between doctrine and theme, see Gösta Hallonsten, "*Theosis* in Recent Research", 281-287, esp. 283.

The only concern of Palamas was to affirm simultaneously the transcendence of God and His immanence in the free gift of communion in the body of Christ.¹⁶

[A]ll Palamas “sought to affirm was the possibility of a real and immediate contact between man and God in divine grace, while rejecting any sort of pantheism or ‘divinisation’ which would make us ‘gods’ in the pagan or hellenistic sense”.¹⁷

Other scholars affirm that Palamas surpasses the earlier Greek fathers with an original novelty:

Gregory Palamas introduced a peculiar *distinctio realis* between the “essence” or “nature” of God and His “powers” or “energies”.¹⁸ Palamas’ fundamental doctrine [... is] the infinite distance between God’s essence and energies.¹⁹

Yet, a third assessment declares:

If the texts attributed to Palamas are indeed all the work of his hand, then it is quite likely that no one will ever be able convincingly to explain what Palamas meant by the distinction of essence and energies in God, since *it is not at all clear that Palamas himself knew what he meant*.²⁰

Admittedly, it is not always easy to interpret Palamas. One may certainly wonder what he means when he writes, for instance, that not only the energies, but even the hypostases are “around” and “separate from” the “divine-generating” essence.²¹

However, if the first line of interpretation (above) is right, then there would be no need of any “debate about Palamism” at all,²² I would contend; because then Palamas would

¹⁶ John Meyendorff, in: Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 202 n61 (Zizioulas’ emphasis [Zizioulas quotes: Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Theology*, 193; yet I have found the quote verbatim in Meyendorff’s “Introduction”, in: Palamas, *Triads*, 22]).

¹⁷ Louis Bouyer, in: Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 315 (orig. in: *A History of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 1, 588).

¹⁸ Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 272.

¹⁹ Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 340. In fact, Palamas explicitly states several times that the essence “stands infinitely infinite times higher” than the energies (279, see further 280 n47). Of the instances Demetracopoulos records, three are easily available in Meyendorff’s edition of Palamas’ *Triads*, 95-96, 110 (3.2.7, 3.2.8, 3.3.14).

²⁰ Hart, “Hidden and Manifest”, 212 n39 (my emphasis).

²¹ The full quotation goes: “There is then not only one without beginning, the essence of God; for all that is around it and separate from it is also without beginning, such as the hypostases, the conditions, distinctions and simply all the manifestations of the divine-generating Superessentiality” (Palamas, quoted in: Gunnarsson, *Mystical Realism*, 237-238 n480 [orig. *Triads*, 3.2.4]).

simply be in perfect agreement with the broad line of the Christian mainstream – equally shared by both Orthodox and Catholics, as well as the more traditional Protestants. Of course, there is nothing especially “Palamite” about the notion that God is both transcendent and immanent, that humans become gods by grace and not by nature, that it is impossible to apprehend the divine nature, that the ontological distance between God and creatures will remain in eternity, or even, that we have access to God only as he is active in creation and not as he is in himself – this is just mainstream Christianity. In this case, the only thing debatable would be whether the essence/energies distinction is an effective way of communicating this content, or if it, rather, is prone to misunderstandings.

Speaking of misunderstandings, Orthodox scholar Torstein Tollefsen obviously feels obliged to clarify – over and over again – that the energies are not some kind of “entities” or “beings” in a reality of their own.²³ In translating *energeia* Tollefsen prefers “activity” before energy, and writes that he feels that “it could give the wrong signal to speak of energy, since that could indicate something quite foreign to Palamas’ mind, namely *a kind of entity in addition to the divine essence*.”²⁴ According to Tollefsen the concept of *energeia* is, “from a philosophical point of view, difficult and partly obscure.”²⁵

But obviously there *is* a debate about Palamism, and this debate concerns not only the *formulation*, but primarily the *content* of the essence/energies distinction – a content which seems to be notoriously difficult to explicate, partly because of the difficulties to interpret Palamas. I find it rather ironical to read the assertion by Aristotle Papanikolaou, that the “concept of the energies of God is *not* difficult to grasp. It basically means the activity of God as opposed to the essence of God.”²⁶ I find this statement ironical because it is not at all clear what is meant by “the activity of God”, “as opposed to” and “the essence of God”. Depending on what one puts into these concepts one may conclude, on the one side, that “the activity of God” is simply God as he is active in creation, or, on the other, that it is some kind of divine intermediate entity “*opposed to the essence of God*.” Occasionally these two sides (here, purposely drawn to extremes) have been categorized as “epistemological” and “ontological”. Yet, through my investigations I have found that the actual explications by the Orthodox theologians generally transcend these neat categories.

²² Alluding to an article by Kallistos Ware: “The Debate about Palamism”.

²³ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 58, 88, 91-92, 128, 131, 168, 186, 192-194.

²⁴ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 186 (my emphasis); cf. 4-5.

²⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 1. He does not seem to be very impressed about “what modern scholars have thought that Palamas taught,” (86) and is especially critical of the term “real distinction”, which, in his assessment, “seems to make a sharper division between essence and *energeia* than admitted by the doctrines” of the fathers (169).

²⁶ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 16 (my emphasis).

Selection of theologians and aspects

Of course, it is impossible to treat every aspect of the essence/energies distinction in every theologian so, naturally, there has to be some kind of selection, both in regard to aspects and theologians. Admittedly, there is a strain of arbitrariness in these selections, which is partly due to the accessibility of the sources and partly to my personal limitations when it comes to languages, pre-knowledge, pre-suppositions, experiences and intellectual faculties.

Theologians

However, I have, from my limited perspective, chosen to investigate three major theologians of the 20th century, all of which are generally recognized to be highly significant for their explication of the essence/energies distinction, namely, Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware and Dumitru Staniloae.²⁷

- **Vladimir Lossky** (1903-1958) is probably the most important and influential theologian during the second half of the 20th century when it comes to shaping Orthodox theology in the direction of neo-Palamism.
- **Kallistos Ware** (b. 1934) is renowned for taking a leading role in the debate about Palamism in the 1970s, and his articles from that time have been frequently referred to as authority on the subject ever since.
- **Dumitru Staniloae** (1903-1993) is widely recognized as one of the most important Orthodox theologians of the 20th century, but is, in spite of that, still awaiting a proper reception. A pioneer in the modern scholarship on Palamas, Staniloae does intriguingly *not* make much use of him when explicating the very distinction between God's essence and energies. Staniloae is interesting, furthermore, because he works quite independently from Lossky et al., both in his reception of Palamas and in his assessment of the essence/energies distinction.

I will treat these theologians in the chronological order of their reception and not of their earthly lives. Therefore, Ware is treated before Staniloae. Even though Staniloae was born

²⁷ For biographical notes and an introduction to the thought of these theologians, see e.g. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, Chs. 7, 9, 21.

thirty-one years before Ware and passed on in 1993, the main sources to his notion of the essence/energies distinction, the *Dogmatics* and *Orthodox Spirituality*, were published in 1978 and 1981 (in Romanian), whereas Ware's most important works on the subject, a couple of articles, appeared in 1975 and 1977. Moreover, Ware's articles were immediately received into the discussion, whereas Staniloae is still waiting to be properly received.

In order to consult a more recent Orthodox scholar who has examined the notion of God's essence and energies in the Greek fathers, I have also added, as an appendix, the voice of Torstein Tollefsen (b. 1953). Whereas Lossky, Ware and Staniloae primarily are engaged in presenting *the* theology of Orthodoxy in the fashion of a neo-patristic synthesis, Tollefsen – a professor of philosophy – approaches the Greek fathers from a more strictly scholarly point of view, and proceeds by a philosophical investigation of their thought.

Aspects

I have also tried to discern, by reading widely on the topic, the most urgent aspects of research for the essence/energies-distinction. These aspects have worked as a guideline through my examination of the sources. Yet, since the scope of this thesis is rather limited and since some aspects might not be treated especially by all, it is not motivated, I think, to highlight all of these aspects in each theologian. Therefore, I have chosen to present what I find to be most interesting and revealing in each case.

The aspects are listed roughly in order of importance. The first two will receive a special attention throughout the study and will be systematically expounded in the "Summarizing Evaluation" (last Ch.). The last two are of lesser importance and will mainly be reported and not so much discussed.

- **The relationship between God's *ousia* and *energeiai*** is a pivotal issue for this thesis. One of the major points of this study is to explicate as clearly as is possible the specific assessment of this relationship in each theologian. I find this important, because in contemporary debate this relationship seems to be a subject of great ambiguity, misunderstandings and different opinions.
- **The definition of God's *ousia* and *energeiai*** are directly related to the previous aspect. Though sometimes neglected in the debate, the definition of *ousia* and *energeiai* certainly affects the relationship between them. Likewise, their professed relationship directly affects the definition of these concepts. Thus, the definition of

ousia and *energeiai* is crucial for the assessment of the essence/energies distinction in any theologian.

- **The need for the essence/energies distinction** is not recognized by all Christian theologians. Therefore it is important to determine how the theologians in this thesis motivate the need for it.
- **The relationship between deification and the essence/energies distinction** is generally emphasized by the promoters of this distinction. Realistic and metaphorical notions of deification apparently lead to different conclusions. But even different understandings of the realistic notion – the only option for Orthodox theologians – may have consequences for how the essence/energies distinction is explicated.
- **The relationship between God’s *energeiai* and hypostases** is also of interest. Not least because of the personalist emphasis of several Orthodox theologians since the 19th century Slavophiles. This personalist emphasis contrasts starkly with the accusation, sometimes pronounced, that the essence/energies distinction seems to be essentialistic. This aspect will inevitably lead us, to some degree, into the sidetrack of Trinitarian theology.
- **The essence/energies distinction as ontological or epistemological** has been a recurring issue in the discussions about the essence/energies distinction. Yet, when faced with the actual proponents of this doctrine, I have found that it is rarely a question of either/or. Besides, there is apparently a discrepancy among theologians about the understanding of the concept “ontological distinction”. Therefore, the very same interpretation may actually be labelled “epistemological” by some and “ontological” by others. Moreover, one might wonder in what measure a term which ends with “-ology” clarifies anything at all, since such terms are simply unifying concepts anyway (in this they resemble the problems with the usage of “-isms”). It is usually much clearer, I think, to be as explicit as possible about what one wants to say, than to recourse to convenient labels. But since these categories are already in use as a tool for assessment of the essence/energies distinction, it is valuable to determine their relation to this distinction in each of our theologians.
- **Rejected alternatives to the essence/energies distinction** are of interest, because in them, and in the motivations for these rejections, presuppositions which have remained hidden or unpronounced in the explication of the essence/energies distinction may emerge more clearly.

- **The translation of *energeiai*** might, in some cases, say something about the conception of the essence/energies distinction. Therefore, it may be of interest to highlight this aspect.
- **The essence/energies distinction as dogma or theologoumenon** is a question which is interesting because of the consequences it might have for the ecumenical dialogue and for a potential future communion of the Eastern Orthodox Church with her sister Churches.
- **The specific character of the contribution of Gregory Palamas** is a controversial issue. Yet, it is generally acknowledged that Palamas added *something* (if only terminological precision) to the Greek patristic understanding of God's *ousia* and *energeiai*. The assessment of Palamas' contribution, might say something about how each theologian conceives of the place of the essence/energies distinction within the Orthodox tradition.

Purpose and method

The purpose of this thesis is to explicate, analyse and discuss the essence/energies distinction in three prominent Orthodox 20th century theologians, namely, Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware and Dumitru Staniloae. This is urgent because of the central position this doctrine occupies in contemporary Orthodoxy, in combination with the lack of precision one usually encounters when references are made to this distinction.

Methodologically, I will proceed primarily by a careful reading of primary sources in order to explicate and clarify, in each theologian, what seems to be the most important lines of thought concerning the essence/energies distinction; and I will also explicate details which may affect, elucidate, or even put into question, these major lines of thought.

The analyses and discussions will follow continually whenever there emerges an issue which might seem to be incoherent or unreasonable, or in conflict with the Greek fathers, other Orthodox theologians or a scholarly consensus. As for dialogue partners, I will primarily turn to other Orthodox theologians and scholars, who will be consulted whenever they may contribute with different perspectives, nuances, questions or aspects of importance to the study. Regarding coherence and reason I will try to reach the clarity expected by our contemporary academic standards. Therefore, I might, at times, push the treated theologians a little further in this direction than their own theological method may allow. Eventually, in the

final chapter, our three theologians will be placed in relation to each other so that their differences and similarities may emerge more clearly.

In subjecting the treated theologians to the standards of academic theology, I will expect coherence, non-contradiction and a sober consciousness about the limits of reasoning. I am aware that many promoters of the essence/energies distinction point out its experiential character, but this, I believe, does not have to exclude a reasonable explication which may be communicated to any human on the basis of our common reason. As Staniloae affirms, whenever one wants to express in words the experience of union with God, one has no option but to resort to the terms of rational knowledge. Therefore, in theological method, one must continuously pass between the experience of union and the possibilities of rational expression.²⁸ And as Tollefsen affirms, when confronted with a theological challenge one has to proceed with a philosophical exposition. Even though the object of our knowledge escapes our intellect one needs to find strategies for speaking and arguing about the teachings which concern God.²⁹ Yet, one has to be careful and attentive, I think, about the limits of the intellect, as many Orthodox theologians never tire of insisting.

Thus, I am in no way promoting a mere rationalism. On the contrary, I appreciate personal and general experience as a source of knowledge in theological reasoning, even though our experiences, and our interpretations of these experiences, may vary to a considerable degree. Thus, my own experiences with life in general and Christian faith in particular, and my acquired sense of the traditional Christian spirit,³⁰ will consciously play a role in my assessment of the treated theologians. Working with theology this is inevitable to some extent, I believe, and, therefore, it is to the advantage of the scholar to do the drawing on, and examining against, one's personal experience both consciously and continuously. This type of work, however, will be done in silence, and only its results will have repercussions in the text. Hence, I am working from the presupposition that in theology experience and reason must not exclude one another but, on the contrary, should co-operate and complement each other.

Working with this thesis, I am aware that I read Lossky and Staniloae, and a few other sources, in translation. This may primarily have consequences for my understanding and analysis of details, whereas the broader lines of thought will be more soundly grounded, since they are more frequently and fully attested.

²⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 95-96; cf. *Orthodox Spirituality*, 347.

²⁹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 63.

³⁰ Approximately something like Florovsky's "mind of the Church fathers" (cf. e.g. Gavriilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, 142-143, 226-227), although more loosely defined.

In translating *energeiai*, I will follow the theologian who is up for investigation. Whereas Lossky and Ware most frequently use “energies”, Staniloae prefers “operations” (or its Romanian equivalent); yet none of them sticks to one single translation only. Some Orthodox theologians today prefer “activities” but, still, “energies” seems to remain the most established translation in Orthodox theology.

Orthodox polemics

This thesis does not intend to engage in the sometimes supposed opposition between the Christian East and West. But since it is virtually impossible to study the subject of the essence/energies distinction without facing frequent polemics, this theme will be addressed briefly here, so that we may leave it aside, hopefully, during the rest of the thesis.

Taking part of the Orthodox tradition through remarkable theologians like Lossky, Ware, Staniloae, and others, is truly rewarding in so many ways. But at the same time, quite a few of these Orthodox theologians challenge the patience of the engaged reader with their tiresome, nagging, futile polemics, which are so outmoded and overused by now, and which are rarely as accurate as one would expect from a serious scholar.

Fortunately, some in the new generation of Orthodox scholars are sober and brave enough to take stand against their predecessors.³¹ One of those who are embarrassed and alarmed by the accustomed polemics is David Bentley Hart. He brings attention to the devastating consequences that such a mindless polemical attitude may lead to – both for Orthodox theology itself and for the relationship of Orthodox Christians to their western sisters and brothers. In this lengthy quote he is remarkably outspoken:

The most damaging consequence, however, of Orthodoxy’s twentieth-century pilgrimage *ad fontes* – and this is no small irony, given the ecumenical possibilities that opened up all along the way – has been an increase in the intensity of Eastern theology’s anti-Western polemic. Or, rather, an increase in the confidence with which such polemic is uttered. Nor is this only a problem for ecumenism: the anti-Western passion (or, frankly, paranoia) of Lossky and his followers has on occasion led to rather severe distortions of Eastern theology. More to the point here, though, it has made intelligent interpretations of Western Christian theology (which are so very necessary) apparently almost impossible

³¹ Cf. e.g. Demacopoulos; Papanikolaou; eds., *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*; and, *Orthodox Constructions of the West*; Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*; Gavriilyuk, “Orthodox Renaissance”; Hart, “Bright Morning of the Soul”; Gallaher, “Waiting for the Barbarians”; Manoussakis, “Theophany and Indication”.

for Orthodox thinkers. Neo-patristic Orthodox scholarship has usually gone hand in hand with some of the most excruciatingly inaccurate treatments of Western theologians that one could imagine – which, quite apart from the harm they do to the collective acuity of Orthodox Christians, can become a source of considerable embarrassment when they fall into the hands of Western scholars who actually know something of the figures that Orthodox scholars choose to calumniate. When one repairs to modern Orthodox texts, one is almost certain to encounter some wild mischaracterization of one or another Western author; and four figures enjoy a special eminence in Orthodox polemics: Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross.³²

For the sake of fairness, we must add that some of the western “scholarly” interpretations of the essence/energies distinction have been rather tendentious and polemical, too.³³ But this, of course, does in no way justify the perpetuation of an ignorant polemical attitude of any theologian on either side of the debate. Yet, quite a few Orthodox theologians perpetuate their inherited polemical approach even today – to the degree that it actually weakens their scientific soberness and soundness.³⁴

In order to understand these polemical ways, one might have to consider their post-colonial situation, as Papanikolaou asserts. He writes that much of what

is promoted by contemporary Orthodox theologians as evidence of an East – West divide is simply constructed in the post-colonial attempt by Orthodox to re-establish an intellectual tradition that is uniquely Orthodox. Much that passes as diametrically opposed divisions between East and West is unsustainable.³⁵

One must not forget that the majority of Orthodox believers have been oppressed by communist regimes for most of the 20th century. Before that, most of the Orthodox world (although not Russia) was occupied by the Ottoman Turks for about 400 years; and even to this day the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople suffers under the Turkish government which violates its religious freedom. Furthermore, because of the reduction of their own lively

³² Hart, “Bright Morning of the Soul”, 325-326.

³³ Tollefsen mentions Martin Jugie, Adrian Fortescue and Siméon Vailhé. The latter two contributed to the 1903 ed. of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, which availability on the internet surprisingly makes Tollefsen believe that their outdated articles “still represents a Roman Catholic view” (*Activity and Participation*, 10-11, [quote 11]). Ware records that for Jugie, who contributed to the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* in the early 1930s, Palamite theology was “a crude distortion of the Fathers” (“Debate about Palamism”, 45, 62 [quote]).

³⁴ This is true of e.g. David Bradshaw, a contemporary promoter of the essence/energies distinction, according to the assessments of Radde-Gallwitz (*Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 223-224), Lévy (“The Woes of Originality”, 120), Flogaus, (“Inspiration – Exploitation – Distortion”, 70-71).

³⁵ Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 538.

intellectual tradition, most Orthodox theology was actually modelled after Protestant and Catholic dogmatic manuals – in Russia into the 19th century and in Greece into the 1960s.³⁶

As Papanikolaou writes, anyone who has suffered oppression knows that “the oppressor’s shadow lingers long after liberation, and much time is needed to recover any sense of authentic identity.”³⁷ Therefore, it is perhaps little wonder if some Orthodox still feel pushed to break free, even if the oppression is not as tangible and wide-ranging anymore.

However, not only those who have experienced oppression themselves, or have relatives who have experienced oppression, tend to be polemical, but this is true for a number of converts too.³⁸ According to Papanikolaou, many of the western converts actually convert because they have come to endorse the meta-narrative, often proclaimed even at Orthodox theological seminaries and schools since the second half of the 20th century, that there is a “diametrical opposition between East and West”. Therefore, they are personally engaged and “invested in the truth of this narrative.”³⁹ According to this meta-narrative,

[t]he “neo-patristic synthesis” is seen as the moment in which contemporary Orthodox theology continues the consensus of the fathers, which was last developed by Gregory Palamas. [...] The greatest mistake of the “West,” according to this story, is its failure to develop the essence-energies distinction, which led to its denial of *theosis* and ultimately to the nihilism of Nietzsche. This meta-narrative has been extremely influential in shaping the mindset of contemporary Orthodox Christians [...] This meta-narrative, however, is false.⁴⁰

The perpetuating of the polemics by contemporary Orthodox theologians is rather sad, I feel, primarily for two reasons: Firstly, it justifies ignorance as a way of interpreting one’s opponents in scholarly debate, even to the point of reducing the riches of one’s own tradition in order to state the case; and secondly, it undermines the virtues proclaimed by the Greek fathers, such as soberness, honesty, conscientiousness, self-examination and discernment of spirits. The deficiency of these patristic virtues in some of the Orthodox scholars adds to the painful experience of reading their superficial critique.

³⁶ Papanikolaou, “Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism”, 528; cf. “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 539.

³⁷ Papanikolaou, “Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism”, 528.

³⁸ Cf. e.g. the highly polemical website www.orthodoxinfo.com, made by Patrick Barnes, a convert from Protestantism. This site claims to be one of the largest and oldest internet sites about Orthodoxy, with over 50,000 visits per month.

³⁹ Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 538.

⁴⁰ Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 538.

Studying the essence/energies distinction, one inevitably has to deal in some way with the issue of Orthodox polemics; because otherwise one might suddenly, and without noticing it, be drawn into a given unfruitful polemical discourse which is bound to compromise one's soberness. By addressing this issue here, I believe, I will be able to bypass it in the following. Yet, occasionally it might be of significance to remark if any assessment in our treated theologians seems to be determined by the claim of Orthodox superiority or anti-Western polemics, rather than by scholarly accuracy.

Androcentric language

The theologians in this thesis generally utilize traditional androcentric language and, thus, write "man" instead of "human" and "him" instead of "her or him" or "it". Yet, because the instances are so frequent, and the corrections of them would have looked rather awkward (e.g. "[hu]man" and "[her or] his"), I have decided to leave these ways of expression in the quotes.

I say "corrections" because it seems to me that they actually mean "human", with no androcentric or sexist connotations whatsoever. Helpfully, John Zizioulas, for instance, explicitly clarifies that he uses the term "man" "in the sense of *anthropos*, that is both male and female [...] and not in its ordinary sexist usage."⁴¹ One wonders, though, why he does not drop the language all together.

Thus, I want to caution the reader and bring attention to the fact that there will be a number of androcentric words in this thesis in several quotes. However, I will not use this kind of language myself. Yet, because of convention and convenience, I will refer to God as "he", even though God according to Christian tradition, of course, is neither male nor female. Since any gender designation of God is hopelessly and equally inadequate, one might just as well, I think, follow the tradition in this case.

⁴¹ Zizioulas, *Eucharistic Communion*, 134-135.

VLADIMIR LOSSKY

The Wake of Neo-Palamism

The powerful theological synthesis of Vladimir Lossky has had a huge impact on subsequent Orthodox theology. Mainstream Orthodox theology today often resembles his creative synthesis, both in its assessment of the most important Church fathers and in its emphasis on certain theological issues, such as apophaticism, transformation, the essence/energies distinction and deification.⁴² Lossky's synthesis appears, today, as a pioneering charter for what is generally labelled neo-Palamism.⁴³

The fathers most central to Lossky are, arguable, the Cappadocians, Dionysios the Areopagite, Maximos the Confessor and, of course, Gregory Palamas. Yet, John McGuckin claims that Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysios and Maximos are, in fact, mainly discovered as dogmatic authorities through the catholic patristic revival of the 20th century. Therefore, Lossky's "miniature 'Library of the Fathers' [...] would have appeared very strange indeed to any Orthodox of an age prior to the mid 20th century."⁴⁴

McGuckin notes, furthermore, that "such a *summa theologiae orthodoxae*" as Lossky provides, was virtually unknown before him. Yet, his thesis of the centrality of deification "allied to a Neo-Palamite understanding of the essence and energies, and routed through a

⁴² McGuckin, "On the Mystical Theology" (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; Papanikolaou, "Divine Energies or Divine Personhood", 357 (cf. "Eastern Orthodox Theology", 544-545).

⁴³ According to Rowan Williams, Lossky is the "the first swallow of the 'neo-Palamite' summer" ("Theology of Lossky", 8); cf. McGuckin, "On the Mystical Theology" (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; Demacopoulos, "Mystery of Divine/Human Communion", 278; Papanikolaou, "Divine Energies or Divine Personhood", 357.

⁴⁴ McGuckin, "On the Mystical Theology" (transcribed lecture), right after the middle.

hesychastic lens, has [...] become very constitutive of many parts of Orthodox self expression today.”⁴⁵

Moreover, George Demacopoulos claims that Lossky has misled his readers to believe that the Orthodox always have utilized the essence/energies distinction. This has led to “an unprecedented movement among modern Orthodox theologians [...] to link Orthodox self-identity to the essence/energy distinction.”⁴⁶

To John McGuckin and Brandon Gallaher, Lossky should be understood as an original thinker and a creative systematic theologian rather than a patristic scholar.⁴⁷ Yet, his theological synthesis and approach to the fathers did not, of course, come out of the blue. On the contrary, it is nurtured by greater historical movements, such as the reviving of the spirituality of the *Philokalia*, the Russian religious renaissance, and the scholarly turn to the fathers which was underway in both East and West even in the 19th century and continued throughout the 20th.⁴⁸

Of course, Lossky’s synthesis embraces a wide theological landscape and does not only engage in the essence/energies distinction. In fact, the essence/energies distinction does not play a prominent role in his later works. In these works he rarely discusses the topic, even in matters where one would have expected him to do so, such as creation, apophaticism, trinitarian theology, redemption and deification.⁴⁹ But the infrequency of references to the

⁴⁵ McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; cf. Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 357.

⁴⁶ Demacopoulos, “Mystery of Divine/Human Communion”, 278.

⁴⁷ McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 298.

⁴⁸ On the general influence of the *Philokalia*, see Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, Ch. 1. On Lossky’s relationship to the Russian religious renaissance, see Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”; McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), n35, n36, plus the text in the lecture concerning these notes; Williams, “Theology of Lossky”, 19-20, 32-35, 231-232, 238-239, 252-254, 285-286; Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 538, 544 (on Bulgakov’s pioneering roll in the recovery of Palamas, see 546-547); Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, 236-237 (on the Russian religious renaissance in general, see chs. 1, 3; and on Lossky as one of the “children” of the Russian religious renaissance, see 43). In fact, Lossky “insisted that Father Sergius [Bulgakov] was without doubt the greatest Orthodox theologian of the 20th century and that his sophiology deserved to be corrected so as to render it entirely admissible” (according to his son, Nicolas Lossky, cited in: Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 297).

Concerning the scholarly turn to the fathers, I have in mind the devoted work in the 19th century in the East by e.g. Optina Pustyn’, and The Spiritual Academies of Moscow, St Petersburg and Kiev, and in the West by e.g. J A Möhler, J H Newman and the Oxford Movement; and in the 20th century by e.g. the “fathers” and “children” of the Russian religious renaissance and the renaissance of the nouvelle theology (cf. Papanikolaou, “Eastern Orthodox Theology”, 539-542; Louth, “Patristic Revival”, 191-192, and *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 9-10; Williams, “Theology of Lossky”, 21-25, [on the development in Russia, 19th to 20th century, and Lossky’s relation to it, see chs. 7-9]; on the “fathers” and “children” of the Russian religious renaissance, see Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, Ch. 3).

⁴⁹ See Lossky’s articles: “Creation”, “Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology”, “Redemption and Deification”; see further all the articles in: *Image and Likeness of God*, and *Orthodox Theology*. It is mainly in the works from the 1940s that Lossky explicates the essence/energies distinction: *Mystical Theology*, *Vision of God*, “Theology of Light”; and a paper from the early 1950s: “Doctrine of Grace”.

essence/energies distinction in his later works does not have to mean that he had changed his mind concerning this issue. Perhaps he simply thought that he already had written enough on the subject.

The most important source to Lossky's opinion of the essence/energies distinction is *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*,⁵⁰ which is one of the most influential and comprehensive books on Orthodox theology ever written.⁵¹ The book explicates in a neo-patristic fashion the Orthodox opinion of the mystery of the trinitarian God and the union between this God and creation.

According to Lossky, the Palamite councils of the 14th century “*in no way yield to the authority and importance of the Œcumenical Councils.*”⁵² Thus, the dogma of the essence/energies distinction is binding for the whole Orthodox Church. It constitutes the “dogmatic basis for union with God”,⁵³ and “is fundamental for the Orthodox doctrine of grace”.⁵⁴

However, the essence/energies distinction is older than these councils, Lossky claims. It was first expressed as such by Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. Its further development by Dionysios and Maximos marks the entrance into “Byzantine theology properly so called”,⁵⁵ and it has remained the “fundamental character of Orthodox spirituality”⁵⁶ and “the very essence of the tradition of the Christian East.”⁵⁷ “All the liturgical texts are impregnated with it.”⁵⁸

What Gregory Palamas added to this distinction, Lossky affirms, is only “doctrinal precision”.⁵⁹ Because of the controversy that aroused around the Holy hesychasts, Palamas found it necessary to express “in dogmatic form what belongs to the realm of mystery, what

⁵⁰ French original: *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient* (1944).

⁵¹ Cf. e.g. Ladouceur, “Vladimir Lossky”, 258; Christos Yannaras, in: Russell, *Fellow Workers*, 155; Louth, “Patristic Revival”, 194, and *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 94; Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 357; John Meyendorff, “Preface”, in: Lossky, *Vision of God*, 5-6; Florovsky, in: Gavrilyuk, “Lossky's Reception of Florovsky”, 201; McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), 2nd-3rd section; Williams, “Theology of Lossky”, x, 21.

⁵² Lossky, *Vision of God*, 125 (my emphasis).

⁵³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 71, cf. 86.

⁵⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 87.

⁵⁵ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 101, 110 (quote), 136-137. In *Mystical Theology* (71) Lossky holds that the essence/energies distinction is found even in the earliest fathers. Yet, when he investigates the matter a couple of years later (in a series of lectures, posthumously published as *The Vision of God*) he provides no evidence of the doctrine earlier than Basil (cf. chs. 2-4). However, Irenaeus is recorded to be the first to treat the theme of Christ's transfiguration in a doctrinal context, connected to the vision of Christ's glory in the Age to come – through which we may participate in the divine light and thus acquire deification (Lossky, *Vision of God*, 35).

⁵⁶ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 65.

⁵⁷ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 46.

⁵⁸ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 69.

⁵⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 71.

ought rather to be preserved in the silence of contemplation than to be made known to everyone in intelligible concepts.”⁶⁰ With Palamas the mystical experience of the hesychasts “is rendered into the *technical language* of theology and inevitably undergoes in this process a certain *doctrinal crystallization*”.⁶¹ Thus, “*the very goal of Palamas’ work consisted in a dogmatic expression* of the foundation of the mystical life proper to Orthodoxy.”⁶² He, thereby, gave the distinction its “definitive expression”.⁶³

Dogma, antinomy and apophaticism

Apophaticism is essential to Lossky’s understanding of dogma and constitutes, according to him, “the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church.”⁶⁴ The dogmatic formulations are meant to safeguard the mysteries, while, at the same time, expressing the truths of revelation.⁶⁵ To Lossky, the dogmas and the spiritual life are intimately related. The very formulations of the dogmas have a direct impact on the religious life and the experiences of believers, while, accordingly, the experiences of the Church are fundamental to the dogmatic formulations.⁶⁶

For Lossky, the doctrines of God can only be expressed in terms of antinomies.⁶⁷ An antinomy is, for him, the affirmation of two equally true contradicting statements which places us before a certain divine mystery and leads us away from conceptual thinking towards union with God. In spite of its short history in theology, he believes that antinomic theology is integral to the Greek fathers.⁶⁸

Lossky adopted its usage from the theology of Pavel Florensky and Sergii Bulgakov. Florensky, in turn, adopted the term from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, but transformed it to fit his theological conception.⁶⁹ Georges Florovsky, too, affirms the antinomic character of the Christian dogmas, but states that there “are no antinomies for the divine Logos, whose

⁶⁰ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 51.

⁶¹ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 130 (my emphasis).

⁶² Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 64-65 (my emphasis).

⁶³ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 69.

⁶⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 26 (cf. 37, 42, 44).

⁶⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 42, 87.

⁶⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 13-14, 226-227, 236.

⁶⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 78.

⁶⁸ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 51-52, 68; cf. *Mystical Theology*, 68.

⁶⁹ Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 290-291 (on Bulgakov’s use of antinomies, see 291-296). Gavriilyuk writes that “Lossky followed Florensky in recognizing the central place of antinomies in religious language” (“Lossky’s reception of Florovsky”, 197). On Florensky’s reception and development of Kant’s antinomic thought, see Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 32-37. In fact, Lossky himself explicitly refers to Florensky’s trinitarian antinomy (*Mystical Theology*, 65-66).

rationality should not be minimized”, and criticizes “the overemphasis on antinomies in Russian religious thought” – a criticism in which he explicitly includes Lossky.⁷⁰

The purpose of antinomy, Lossky affirms, is to draw the theologian’s attention away from conceptual thinking towards the divine mysteries and union with the Unknowable. The antinomic formulations of the dogmas summons us to change our hearts and minds “enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him.”⁷¹ Without antinomy we will be stuck with the rational concepts of the doctrines and never reach any real experience with God.⁷²

With his antinomic method, which he thinks is “the theological method of the Fathers,”⁷³ Lossky pushes the formulations of the doctrines into as sharp contradictions as is possible. As we will see, below, he affirms that God’s *ousia* and hypostases are actually synonymous, that we may participate in the divine essence which per definition is imparticipable, and that the divine essence is not present in the uncreated energies but, yet, virtually identical to them. In the face of these irresolvable contradictions, reason will give way to the experience of union with God.

It seems pretty clear to me, that Gallaher is wrong to suppose that “throughout his work, Lossky simply assumes that ‘antinomic’ and ‘apophatic’ are synonymous.”⁷⁴ Rather, to Lossky, antinomy is a certain *method* which works with the divine realities and our concepts about them, whereas apophaticism is a *general attitude* which adamantly clings to the notion that God is necessarily beyond everything that we may ever claim to know. Yet, Lossky’s antinomies and apophaticism complement each other and lead to the same goal: the experience of union with God.

In the apophatic union with God, Lossky affirms, one has to negate all that may be known. One has to deny everything created in order to ascend towards higher degrees of being. For, one can only attain to God “in the darkness of absolute ignorance.”⁷⁵ This union with God implies a progression, the acquiring of something not hitherto possessed by human nature, a transformation from created to uncreated, where the human go forth from her- or himself to reside wholly in the unknowable God. But even if one would reach the highest stage of mystical union one would have no other rational notion of God than that he is

⁷⁰ Gavriilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, 144-145, 145 n46 (quotes 145 n46, 144).

⁷¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 43.

⁷² Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 52.

⁷³ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 68.

⁷⁴ Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 286.

⁷⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 25.

incomprehensible.⁷⁶ Yet, as we advance in the union our consciousness grows, Lossky affirms, and this consciousness or awareness is called *gnosis* (knowledge) by the Greek fathers. “In the higher stages of the mystical way, it is fully revealed as perfect knowledge of the Trinity.”⁷⁷

For Lossky, the goal of apophatic and antinomic theology is *neither nature nor person, but transcends every notion of both nature and person – this goal is the incomprehensible Trinity*.⁷⁸ However, this goal is severely criticised by Zizioulas, who claims that it eviscerates the particularities of the divine persons.⁷⁹

The distinction between God’s essence and energies

For Lossky there is no doubt about that the union with God in the age to come is a real union. We are really promised to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).⁸⁰ This is affirmed also by the fathers, and Lossky cites, among others, Maximos the Confessor, who even speaks of a “unity and identity” between our human nature and the divine nature.⁸¹ In the words of Gregory Palamas, though arbitrarily translated by Lossky, our union with the divine nature is even expressed in terms of an “antinomy”:

We attain to participation in the divine nature, and yet at the same time it remains totally inaccessible. We need to affirm both at the same time and to preserve the antinomy as a criterion of right devotion.⁸²

Yet, in fact, the word “antinomy” is actually *not* used by Palamas himself, as Gallaher has shown. According to Gallaher, Palamas’ text rather reads something like this: We need to *affirm and preserve both things* at the same time as a criterion of right devotion. Interestingly, Lossky’s interpolation of the quote seems to be dependent on Bulgakov’s almost thirty years earlier exegesis of the very same text.⁸³

⁷⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 38.

⁷⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 217.

⁷⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 44.

⁷⁹ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 94.

⁸⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 67.

⁸¹ Maximos uses this same expression in two different quotes: Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 185, 214 (orig. Maximos, “De ambiguis”, PG, XCI, 1308 B; PG, XCL, 1308).

⁸² Palamas, in: Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 69 (orig. PG, CL, 932 D). Lossky also quotes this passage, with a slightly different translation, though still with the word “antinomy”, in: *Vision of God*, 127.

⁸³ Gallaher, “‘Sophiological’ Origins”, 290-291 (cf. 290-298). In classical and patristic Greek, Gallaher asserts, the word *antinomia* is not even used in the sense given to it by Kant and, by extension, Florensky and Bulgakov; it has rather “an ethical meaning (i.e. a conflict of laws or ethical norms [...])” (290).

However, Lossky argues that since we are promised to participate in God's impalpable nature, we are compelled to recognize an "ineffable distinction" that may account for "the accessibility of the inaccessible nature."⁸⁴ This is the distinction

between the essence of God, or His nature, properly co-called [*sic.*], which is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations, forces proper to and inseparable from God's essence, in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself.⁸⁵

Thus, the promise of participation in the divine nature is actually not about participating in God's nature "properly [s]o-called", but about participating in his energies. To Lossky, this is a way to *resolve* the antinomy "without suppressing it," since the ineffable essence/energies distinction preserves the deep-rooted mystery intact.⁸⁶ Explicating this distinction, he affirms, on the one hand, that

God's presence in His energies must be understood in a realistic sense.⁸⁷ God is in no way diminished in His energies; He is wholly present in each ray of His divinity.⁸⁸ [D]istinction is not separation: it does not divide God into knowable and unknowable. [...] He remains identical in these two modes of existence: the same, and at the same time, different.⁸⁹ [I]nseparable from His essence, [...] the energies] bear witness to the unity and the simplicity of the being of God.⁹⁰ [The unity of God's] essence and energies [...] is infinitely greater [than the solar disk and its rays], even to the point of identity.⁹¹

On the other hand, Lossky affirms that

the distinction between essence and grace has its basis in God Himself,⁹² [and] is the expression of a reality of a religious order.⁹³ God reveals Himself, totally gives Himself in His energies, and remains totally unknowable and incommunicable in His essence.⁹⁴

⁸⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70, 69.

⁸⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70.

⁸⁶ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 127.

⁸⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73.

⁸⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 74.

⁸⁹ Lossky, "Theology of Light", 55-56; cf. *Mystical Theology*, 86.

⁹⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 76.

⁹¹ Lossky, "Doctrine of Grace", 77.

⁹² Lossky, *Vision of God*, 135.

⁹³ Lossky, "Theology of Light", 52; cf. *Mystical Theology*, 76.

⁹⁴ Lossky, "Theology of Light", 55.

God is not limited by His essence. He is more than essence.⁹⁵ [T]he energies [...] flow eternally from the one essence of the Trinity. They are [...] outside of [...] the] inaccessible essence. God thus exists both in His essence and outside of His essence.⁹⁶ [T]he distinction between essence and energies is more radical [...] than the] sun's rays are different from the solar disk.⁹⁷

From these quotations, it seems to me that Lossky manages to preserve the antinomic character of the essence/energies distinction. It is also rather clear to me that his ineffable distinction between God's essence and energies does not lend itself to a convenient determination as either epistemological or ontological. In Lossky's explication, the energies are not just a different concept than the essence (something like God's nature as active) since they are *eternally outside* the essence; but neither are they something ontologically distinct from the essence since they are inseparable from the essence, "even to the point of identity" (as quoted above).

At times, Lossky is rather explicit about the radicality of the distinction between God's essence and energies. Thus he claims that God's essence is "by definition incommunicable" and, in fact, has no "presence" in creation.⁹⁸ The Trinity, *though not its essence*, dwells in creation by means of its *energies* which are communicable and which – in their communication to the world – are identical to grace.⁹⁹

In his super-essential nature God "remains as if in absolute repose, without manifesting Himself in any way."¹⁰⁰ For Lossky, every movement of God, such as his life, thoughts, ideas, truth, wisdom and love, is effectively removed to the energies, "which are subsequent to the essence and are its natural manifestations, but are external to the very being of the Trinity."¹⁰¹ Consequently, to him, even God's inter-trinitarian love is an external energy:

To say: 'God is love', 'the divine Persons are united by mutual love', is to think of a common manifestation, the 'love-energy' possessed by the three hypostases, for the union of the Three is higher even than love.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Lossky, "Theology of Light", 56.

⁹⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73.

⁹⁷ Lossky, "Doctrine of Grace", 77.

⁹⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 86.

⁹⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 86.

¹⁰⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 72.

¹⁰¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 80-81, 95-96 (quote, 81).

¹⁰² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 81.

Moreover, Lossky claims that God is not “limited” by the essence,¹⁰³ but “more than essence”¹⁰⁴ and also “external to the essence”.¹⁰⁵ From this we may contend that Lossky conceives of God’s essence as having *some kind of limit*, outside of which the energies exist eternally (although he acknowledges, of course, that terms like “outside” are inappropriate expressions)¹⁰⁶.

In fact, Lossky explicitly challenges the definition of God’s essence which includes all that is God. Such a definition, he claims, is an error of the philosophy which considers God as pure act. To him, the concept of God includes the divine energies, whereas *the concept of God’s essence does not*.¹⁰⁷

Yet, one might wonder whether Lossky is in conflict not only with thomistic philosophy, but also with the most conventional scholarly, patristic and ancient Greek definition of God’s essence – according to which the essence is the “what” of God, God’s definition or whatever is constitutive of God.¹⁰⁸ Partially in line with this, Lossky himself actually do claim that “essence” according to Basil the Great is “that which makes [... something] what it is and not something else.”¹⁰⁹ He also quotes Maximos, who writes that the essence is “what God is in himself”.¹¹⁰ But, since the Greek patristic consensus, in addition, holds that there can be no nature without energy and consequently no God without energy,¹¹¹ it follows, I would contend, that God’s eternal energy inevitably must be included in that which is considered to be constitutive of God – in the “what” of God – and, consequently, in the concept of the divine essence.

This actualizes the problem, I think, that Lossky does not, like Staniloae (as we will see), distinguish properly between God’s eternal inter-trinitarian energy, constitutive of his essence, and his energies directed towards creation. In Tollefsen’s assessment, the Greek fathers – including Palamas – actually do distinguish between God’s activity *ad intra* (within the essence) and *ad extra* (towards creation).¹¹² But for Lossky, no energy whatsoever is admissible in God’s essence. Therefore, he seems to be left with the two options that (1) God

¹⁰³ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 56; “Doctrine of Grace”, 78; *Mystical Theology*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Lossky, “Doctrine of Grace”, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 74.

¹⁰⁷ Lossky, “Doctrine of Grace”, 78; *Mystical Theology*, 77

¹⁰⁸ Cf. e.g. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 23, 277; Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 151-152; Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 2-3, 131, 222-223; Williams, “Philosophical Structures”, 32-33, and “Theology of Lossky”, 165, 168; Stead, *Divine Substance*, 81-84.

¹⁰⁹ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 64.

¹¹⁰ Maximos in: Lossky, *Vision of God*, 110 (orig. *Scholiae on the Celestial Hierarchy*, IV, 3, PG 4, col. 55).

¹¹¹ Cf. e.g. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 152, 193; Maximos the Confessor, *The Ambigua*, 33 (1048A-B); John the Damascene, *Orthodox Faith*, 252-253, 309-310 (2.23, 3.15).

¹¹² See “Appendix”, below.

can be God even without any energy, or that (2) the conventional definition of essence is not fully adequate.

(1) In fact, Lossky explicitly denies that the energies may determine the divine being in any sense – they are only “an *exterior manifestation* of the Trinity”.¹¹³ If Lossky, furthermore, would fully endorse the conventional opinion that God’s essence is what God is according to definition, or *whatever is constitutive of God*, then he, in contrast to the Greek fathers, would have to affirm that God may be God even without any eternal energy. Yet, I am doubtful about whether he would go so far.

(2) Rather, it seems to me that Lossky’s conception of what God is according to definition actually includes both the essence and the hypostases as well as the energies, because this is how he generally uses the word God. As we have seen above, Lossky affirms that God is not “limited” by the essence, but “more than essence” – God is even “external to the essence” as well as internal to it. Consequently, to Lossky, the divine essence can *not* be the “what” of God or God’s definition. On the contrary, the essence is generally conceived of as a certain “mode of existence” of God.¹¹⁴ Therefore, we may infer that Lossky does not fully endorse the conventional definition of God’s essence, even though it is affirmed also by the Greek fathers.

However, even if Lossky’s conception of God’s essence and energies may be thought of in terms of different modes of existence, we may not forget that he affirms, at the same time, that God remains identical in both of these modes of existence. Thus, his proclaimed antinomy dwells intact.

The preference for translating *energeiai* with “energies”, rather than “activities” or “operations”, is perfectly plausible, I think, within the context of Lossky’s antinomic theology. In comparison to the other alternatives the word “energies” better reflects his conception of the *energeiai* as a certain mode of existence eternally distinct from the essence, rather than as the essence in motion.

However, some of the recent interpreters of Lossky do not seem to take his antinomic method seriously. Rather, they seem inclined to neglect or correct it. John McGuckin, for instance, thinks that “Lossky’s core concern [... is that] God manifests his personal reality in the world, through the expression of his energies”. This means, McGuckin claims, that God makes “the *unknowable divine essence present to the creature* through the life-giving

¹¹³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 80 (my emphasis), cf. 95.

¹¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 55-56.

energies.”¹¹⁵ But Lossky would never accept such an expression. If God’s essence occasionally is said to be accessible to creation, it is so only in the sense that the selfsame God is identical in his essence and energies – in both modes of existence; but yet, Lossky is adamant that God’s “nature, *properly [s]o-called*, [...] is inaccessible, unknowable and incommunicable”.¹¹⁶ As we have seen, Lossky explicitly denies that God’s essence is present in creation.

Furthermore, Aristotle Papanikolaou claims, in a chapter on Lossky, that the essence/energies distinction “is *not* difficult to grasp.”¹¹⁷ Yet, in contrast, Lossky himself explicitly states that this distinction *is* difficult to grasp.¹¹⁸ To him, the very point of this doctrine (as with every doctrine) is that it is *ungraspable* for human reason: It is an *antinomy*, before which our rational (or even “Kantian”)¹¹⁹ minds are silenced, so that we may ascend beyond conceptual thinking towards union with God.

Thus, it is not admissible, when interpreting Lossky, to neglect his antinomic challenge or try to correct him. Such an attitude does not take his methodological choice of path seriously and seems to presume that he is not competent to express what he really wants to say.

The need for the essence/energies distinction

The reality of deification

Lossky affirms that the essence/energies distinction is necessary in order to maintain the reality of deification. Deification is not a metaphor, he says;¹²⁰ we are really called to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4), or, more properly, “all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature”. Thus, we “remain creatures while becoming God by grace”.¹²¹

The union with God, Lossky affirms, cannot be a union according to essence or hypostasis, because such a union, even in the slightest degree, would absorb completely the human essence or hypostasis, respectively. In the first case, God “would have as many

¹¹⁵ McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), n29 plus the text concerning this note (my emphasis).

¹¹⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁷ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 16 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 76.

¹¹⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 230.

¹²⁰ *Vision of God*, 135.

¹²¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 87.

hypostases as there would be persons participating in His essence.”¹²² In the second case (in which the hypostasis of the Son would be implied), Lossky states that we cannot be “mingled” with the Son, because if we are “identified” with him we would cease to exist as persons, which would lead to “an impersonal deification, a blessedness in which there would be no blessed.”¹²³ Yet, one may wonder why he does not consider some kind of *personal union* in which the creature is *confirmed as person* – as the *other* – rather than swallowed by the hypostasis of the Son.¹²⁴ The answer to this question, I think, lies in his peculiar conception of union.

From Lossky’s notion about the absorbing unions of essence and hypostasis, we may infer that he conceives of union simply as *intermingling*. As recorded above, he explicitly expresses the refuted hypostatical union in terms of being *mingled* and *identified* with the Son. Furthermore, in the deification of the human nature of Christ, he claims that the divine energies *penetrate* or *permeate* it and thus give “to it an ineffable faculty of penetrating the Divinity” in return;¹²⁵ and there is no reason to postulate, I think, that he considers the deification of the human nature of Christ’s followers in any other way, since they constitute the body of Christ.¹²⁶

Thus, if Lossky conceives of union as intermingling, identification and mutual permeation, then it is not hard to see why he refutes the unions of essence and hypostasis, and why he needs to distinguish within God another mode of existence, to which it is possible for creation to intermingle without being absorbed. Yet, Lossky never provides any argument for why our human energies are not immediately absorbed by the divine energies in this intermingling union.

Messalianism

One could assume that Lossky would need the doctrine of the essence/energies distinction also in order to avoid Messalianism, a heresy from the 4th century, which “asserted that the

¹²² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 69-70 (quote 70).

¹²³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 165-166.

¹²⁴ As in the case of Staniloae (see the Ch. on him, below) and Zizioulas (*Communion and Otherness*, Ch. 1, especially 19-32). Interestingly, Zizioulas claims that his own position “is precisely the opposite to that of Lossky” (74 n168). Towards the end of his all too short life, Lossky showed an increasing interest in the concept of person as it was outlined by the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, but he never managed to interrelate properly this theme with his earlier developed apophaticism and essence/energies distinction (see Papanikolaou’s critical evaluation in, *Being with God*, esp. 122-125).

¹²⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 145-146.

¹²⁶ Cf. e.g. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 155-157, 182, 185.

essence of the Trinity could be perceived by the senses, by carnal eyes”.¹²⁷ Indeed, Lossky, following Palamas, claims that we may perceive God with our bodily eyes, but only as uncreated light – that is, in his energies and not in his essence.¹²⁸ Yet, Palamas and the holy hesychasts of the 14th century were actually accused of Messalianism.¹²⁹

However, it seems to me that Lossky considers this accusation as simply misguided, since he claims that God’s energies “are strictly speaking neither sensible nor intelligible; but [...] transcend the intellect as well as the senses [...] and] are perceived by the whole man and not by just one of his faculties.”¹³⁰ The perception of the divine light implies the participation in, and transformation by, this very light.¹³¹ Thus, the general opinion of the Greek fathers, he claims, is far “from the intellectualistic mysticism of Origen and Evagrius, from the escape out of the sensible toward the intelligible [...] but is] just as far also from the sensible perceptions of the Messalians.”¹³²

So, even if Lossky affirms the possibility of seeing the uncreated light with our bodily eyes, he emphasizes that it is, strictly speaking, not sensible, but transcends the senses, and is rather perceived by the whole human through participation and transfiguration.

Creation

However, the creation of God is, in fact, a further reason for why Lossky needs the essence/energies distinction. It is because of this distinction that God can manifest himself fully and be wholly present in creation without compromising the inaccessibility of the essence. God can remain ever the same in his essence, in absolute repose, while being active in creation with his energies. Through the energies God is free to create outside of his being.¹³³

Lossky writes, furthermore:

If we deny the real distinction between essence and energy, we cannot fix any very clear borderline between the procession of the divine persons and the creation of the world; both the one and the other will be equally acts of the divine nature. The being and the

¹²⁷ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 91 (cf. 117).

¹²⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 223-224.

¹²⁹ Cf. e.g. Meyendorff, *Study of Palamas*, 33, 35-37, 48.

¹³⁰ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 118 (cf. 131-133).

¹³¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 224.

¹³² Lossky, *Vision of God*, 118 (cf. 136).

¹³³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 74-75.

action of God would then appear to be identical and as having the same character of necessity.¹³⁴

For Lossky, then, the procession of the hypostases is an act of the divine nature whereas creation is an act of the *energieai* of God. If creation was an act of the divine nature it would be eternal and necessary, just like the persons of the Trinity. While this would seem quite intelligible within the scheme of Lossky's essence/energies distinction it is by no means a universal Orthodox opinion.

In Tollefsen's assessment of the Greek fathers, God is active – has an *energeia* – within himself, but also directs activity towards creation. Both are actions of the divine nature, but whereas the activity within God is constitutive of his being, the activity towards creation is not. In his activity *ad extra*, God modifies his essence, yet without compromising its immutability, in order to accomplish something which is external to himself, namely, creation. But even though he is present to us in his essence we cannot grasp anything of it, other than that there must be “a sublime ontological foundation for being active in this way.”¹³⁵

In his eagerness to save God's essence from creation, and creation from God's essence, Lossky seems to make the divine essence into a remote reality with no other content than being the tri-unitarian super-essence, completely deprived of any possible feature.

The trinitarian dogma and its relation to the essence/energies distinction

Referring to Palamas, Lossky affirms that the essence/energies-distinction is antinomic in a way analogous to the trinitarian dogma.¹³⁶ He emphasizes that the 4th century fathers who established the doctrine of the Trinity made use of two synonyms to distinguish what is common from what is particular in God, namely, *ousia* and *hypostasis*. This was a genius move, he affirms, which made it possible to express the unity and differentiation in God without giving pre-eminence to one or the other.¹³⁷

Lossky expresses the ineffable trinitarian order as “3=1”, because the “sum” of the three hypostases is always the divine unity. Since there is no quantitative increase in God the

¹³⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73-74 (Lossky refers here to Palamas' *Capita physica*, 96, 1189 B).

¹³⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 91-92 (quote 92). See further, “Appendix”, below.

¹³⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 69.

¹³⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 50-51; “Theological Notion of the Human Person”, 112-113.

hypostases are uncountable.¹³⁸ They are not even “‘three’ but ‘Tri-Unity.’ *In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction*”.¹³⁹

Obviously, Lossky is determined to emphasize the antinomic character of the Trinity. He does simply not leave any room for a resolution of three “who” in one “what”. Yet this seems to be a controversial notion in Orthodox theology. Zizioulas, for instance, while acknowledging the mystery, thinks that the Cappadocian solution is perfectly logical,¹⁴⁰ and thus not antinomic in the Losskian sense.

However, to Lossky, the antinomic tension in the trinitarian dogma, as in every dogma, makes way to contemplation:

Our thought must be in continuous motion, pursuing now the one, now the three, and returning again to the unity; it must swing ceaselessly between the two poles of the antinomy, in order to attain to the contemplation of the sovereign repose of this threefold monad.¹⁴¹

Thus, it seems to me that the place of convergence in Lossky’s analogy between the distinctions of God’s *hypostases* and *ousia*, on the one hand, and his *ousia* and *energeiai*, on the other, is simply this: Just as God is one yet three, he is accessible yet inaccessible; neither the persons nor the energies add any plurality in God; and as antinomic doctrines both are intended to lead to contemplation.

It is not entirely clear whether Lossky intends anything more with this analogy. He is not very explicit and, therefore, we are left without further guidance. Yet this is unfortunate, I think, because it really leaves the door open for speculation.

There is a backside to Lossky’s apophaticism and antinomies, I would contend. Whereas Lossky might think that he leaves the reader on the bridge to contemplation, his unfinished thoughts, suggestions, images and analogies might just as well leave the reader with the

¹³⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 47-48 (quotes 48).

¹³⁹ Lossky, “Theological Notion of the Human Person”, 113 (my emphasis). Even though it is outside the scope of this study, I cannot remain silent about a peculiarity that I have found in Lossky’s trinitarian theology. As we have seen, Lossky thinks that the divine persons are an uncountable tri-unity – they are, surprisingly, not even three; and their union is higher even than the inter-trinitarian love. Furthermore, to him, a union of hypostases necessarily entails absorption and identification. Therefore, I wonder how Lossky’s theology may preserve the Son and the Spirit as persons at all. Rather, it should follow, it seems to me, that they would be absorbed into the person of the Father. (Cf. Papanikolaou, who also thinks that Lossky undermines the role of hypostases – yet for another reason, namely, his apophaticism [*Being with God*, 123-125].)

¹⁴⁰ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 158-159. With the analogy of one human nature and many human persons the Cappadocians, Zizioulas writes, “removed all apparent illogicality from their position, since it is logically possible to speak of one substance and three *hypostases*” (158 [Zizioulas’ emphasis]).

¹⁴¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 46.

impression that Eastern Orthodox theology seems to be rather obscure and irrational. Furthermore, some readers might feel tempted to finish his unfinished thoughts themselves, which may lead to rather distorted versions of Orthodox theology. Besides, his apophatic and antinomic theology may even prove to be pastorally unhelpful.

Moreover, in promoting such a theology, Lossky might seem to neglect the scholarly clarity which is expected of academic work.¹⁴² He explicitly denies the possibility of understanding Orthodox theology “through the rigid concepts of an academic theology which is foreign to it.”¹⁴³ Yet these rigid concepts, I would contend, are not necessarily intended to be exhaustive, but can be utilized in different ways in different contexts. In academic theology the conceptual apparatus is primarily intended, it seems to me, to be an instrument for clarity of thought. Thus, it may even serve to magnify the mystery of God, if that would be desirable. Yet, for Lossky it simply seems to smack of rationalism.

Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church

The establishment of the Church is the work of both Christ and the Holy Spirit, Lossky claims. While Christ is the head of the Church the Holy Spirit fills it with divinity, so that “the Godhead dwells within her bodily as it dwelt in the deified humanity of Christ.”¹⁴⁴ While Christ’s work concerns the human nature, the work of the Holy Spirit concerns persons and applies to each person singly.¹⁴⁵ (This opinion is severely criticized by Zizioulas.)¹⁴⁶

Through the work of Christ our nature is restored and renewed, freed from every taint of sin and external necessity. But even if we in our nature are members and parts of the humanity of Christ, we have not yet in our persons reached union with God. Even though the Church is already the body of Christ, the redemption of our nature does not provide every

¹⁴² For a criticism of Lossky’s imprecision, incoherencies and inconsistencies, see Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, esp. 63-65, 94 (Zizioulas’ critique), 122-125; Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 375-377; McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), the fifth sixth. The primary object for the criticism of Papanikolaou, Zizioulas and McGuckin, is Lossky’s apophaticism. However, it seems to me that his radical apophaticism is softened somewhat in his later works (see Lossky’s articles collected in *Image and Likeness*; see also Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, esp. 91-92, 109-110; Papanikolaou “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 371-372, 382-383 n80, 383 n84).

¹⁴³ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 69.

¹⁴⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 156-157 (quote 157).

¹⁴⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 166 (cf. 167, 172-174, 176, 182, 185-186, 192-193); cf. Papanikolaou, who makes a distinction in Lossky’s theology between Christ’s “objective side” of salvation and the Spirit’s “subjective side” (*Being with God*, 107, 111).

¹⁴⁶ For Zizioulas, the unity of the Church is not to be found in Christ as nature, but as person. Moreover, the Spirit is not just working individually, but works for unity as well (*Communion and Otherness*, 74-75 n168).

necessary condition for deification. Whereas Christ's work is consummated, the work of the Holy Spirit is not yet accomplished.¹⁴⁷

Lossky affirms, furthermore, that the Holy Spirit "at a given moment [was] sent into the world to be present there not only by His operation, common to all three Persons of the Trinity, but considered as Person."¹⁴⁸ Eastern theology, Lossky states, distinguishes the Holy Spirit from his gifts; so even though present in creation he remains "undisclosed and hidden, concealed by the deity which He reveals to us, by the gift which He imparts" – this deity or gift being the uncreated grace or energies, "the abundance of the divine nature".¹⁴⁹ Thus, even though he receives a multiplicity of names the Holy Spirit remains "unrevealed". However, these names would more accurately be attributed to grace.¹⁵⁰

According to Lossky, it is only possible for human persons to attain the perfection of the Holy Spirit within the Church, the body of Christ;¹⁵¹ and the perfection of the Church is only accomplished when each member has become "two-natured" by their own free assent and co-operation with the grace of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵² While God has given all objective conditions for deification in the Church, we must contribute with the subjective conditions through our free co-operation, *synergeia*, with the divine will.¹⁵³

Thus, Lossky affirms that we should unite in ourselves our created nature with a second nature, that is, a deifying energy, which is conferred to us by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁴ In this way the Holy Spirit, in communicating himself to each member of the body of Christ, "creates, so to speak, many Christs, many of the Lord's anointed".¹⁵⁵ As we saw above, Lossky claims that the human nature of Christ is deified by being permeated by the divine energies and, thus, receives the ineffable faculty of permeating the divine energies in turn. And presumably, Lossky would think of the deification of the human nature of Christ's followers in the same way, since they constitute the body of Christ.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 155.

¹⁴⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 157-158.

¹⁴⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 162.

¹⁵⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 163-164.

¹⁵¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 164.

¹⁵² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 185.

¹⁵³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 196.

¹⁵⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 155, 182, 185.

¹⁵⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 174.

¹⁵⁶ Above, 32.

The divine light

The identification of the divine energies with the divine light was an important issue when the doctrine of the essence/energies distinction was established. It is also an important issue to Lossky. The divine energies, he affirms, make themselves known as light.

In so far as God reveals Himself, communicates Himself and is able to be known, He is Light. It is not only by analogy with physical light that God is called Light. The divine light is not an allegorical or abstract thing; it is given in mystical experience.¹⁵⁷

To Lossky, the divine light is the visible quality of the divine energies. It is not a reality of the intellectual or sensible orders, yet it “fills at the same time both intellect and senses, revealing itself to the whole man, and not only to one of his faculties.”¹⁵⁸ As we have seen, Lossky affirms that it is possible to see the uncreated light with one’s bodily eyes, but this vision requires participation in, and transformation by, this light. Yet, we may never apprehend the light, because even though we may perceive the light by our senses and intellect, it transcends both.¹⁵⁹

According to Lossky, the expressions of light in the Bible are not intended as metaphors but express a real aspect of God:

If God is called Light, it is because He cannot remain foreign to our experience. *Gnosis*, the highest stage of awareness of the divine, is an experience of uncreated light, the experience itself being light: “in Thy light, we shall see light”. It is both that which one perceives, and that by which one perceives in mystical experience.¹⁶⁰

Yet, *gnosis* is not only light, Lossky affirms, but also a certain knowledge which is a “consciousness” or “awareness in the ways of the spiritual life”. This *gnosis* will grow in the human person as she or he advances in the union with God, and in “the higher stages of the mystical way, it is fully revealed as perfect knowledge of the Trinity.”¹⁶¹

At the transfiguration of Christ the real transformation occurred in the disciples, says Lossky. There was no change in Christ, not even in his human nature. Rather, the apostles received for a time the power to see him as he really was, in his resplendent divine light. They

¹⁵⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 220.

¹⁵⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 221.

¹⁵⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 221-224 (cf. above, 33).

¹⁶⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 218.

¹⁶¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 217.

“were taken out of history and given a glimpse of eternal realities.”¹⁶² The disciples, thus, participated in, and were transformed by, this uncreated light (energies/grace); otherwise this experience would not have been possible.¹⁶³

Since grace is perceived as light, says Lossky, the presence of the triune God cannot escape our awareness. Thus, Lossky writes:

We are incapable of not being aware of God, if our nature is in proper spiritual health. Insensibility in the inner life is an abnormal condition. [...] Grace will make itself known as joy, peace, inner warmth and light. [...] A person who enters into a closer and closer union with God, cannot remain outside the light.¹⁶⁴

It is not really clear, though, if Lossky actually means that grace *always* is perceived as light. True, Lossky writes: “*Just because it is light* grace, the source of revelation, cannot remain within us unperceived.”¹⁶⁵ Yet, in spite of that, he would perhaps consider the experience of joy, peace and inner warmth as qualified as experiences of grace, too, even without any perception of light. Certainly, Lossky affirms: “Grace cannot be unknown, unfelt [...] but] must be an experience”, and this experience must be enjoyed by each Christian “to the degree appropriate to him or her”.¹⁶⁶ However, he also affirms that he fully accepts “the severe word of St. Symeon the New Theologian, who *refuses the name of Christian to those who have not had in this life the experience of the divine Light.*”¹⁶⁷

Yet, perhaps, one should in this context interpret the words “experience of the divine Light” simply as an experience of grace and not as a visual experience? It is rather unlikely, it seems to me, that Lossky would mean that every Orthodox Christian, worthy of this designation, actually has a visual experience of the divine light, because, as far as I know, such a visual experience is not common enough among ordinary Orthodox Christians to support such a view.¹⁶⁸

However, on the other hand, Lossky affirms that the certainty of union with God which is a marked feature of the Orthodox tradition is *best explained by the experience of light*

¹⁶² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 223.

¹⁶³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 224.

¹⁶⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 225.

¹⁶⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 225 (my emphasis).

¹⁶⁶ Lossky, “Doctrine of Grace”, 84.

¹⁶⁷ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 68-69 (my emphasis).

¹⁶⁸ In the Orthodox tradition, the vision of the divine light is generally ascribed to the saints and not to just any believer (cf. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 123-124, 126-128).

*recorded in the famous conversation between St Seraphim of Sarov and Motovilov.*¹⁶⁹ But still, this does not mean that Lossky thinks that such an experience is common to Orthodox Christians, because he affirms at the same time that the “example of St. Seraphim is *all the more striking* in that it revives in quite recent times the sanctity of the Desert Fathers, which *appears almost fabulous* to our reasonable and lukewarm faith”.¹⁷⁰ But if the sanctity of St Seraphim and the Desert fathers is that unusual today, one wonders what makes Lossky cling to the claim that the certainty of union with God – characteristic of the Christian East – is best explained by this kind of experience.

¹⁶⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 227. A lengthy part of the conversation is quoted in *Mystical Theology*, 227-229; the complete text is available in Boosalis, *Joy of the Holy*, 93-122.

¹⁷⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 230 (my emphasis).

KALLISTOS WARE

The Debate about Palamism

The voice of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has been increasingly influential throughout his life. He is well-known for his contribution to the translation of the *Philokalia* and as a promoter of its spirituality. Personally he claims to be “in the tradition of Saint Gregory of Thessalonica”,¹⁷¹ and his deep interest in hesychasm has accompanied his entire career.¹⁷² During the 1970s Ware contributed to the periodical *Eastern Churches Review* with a couple of articles on Palamism, which have been frequently referred to as authority on the subject ever since: “God Hidden and Revealed: The Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energies Distinction” (1975) and “The Debate About Palamism” (1977). These two articles constitute the main sources for his assessment of the essence/energies distinction. Yet, he has continued to express his opinion about this distinction in different places. Therefore, I do not confine myself to these articles alone.

In comparison to Lossky, it seems to me, Ware is less of an original thinker. He is also less sweeping and often more careful in his assessment of historical sources – and certainly less polemical. According to Andrew Louth his “position within English-speaking Orthodoxy is paramount, and what exactly Orthodoxy amounts to, as perceived by Orthodox in the West, owes a very great deal to him.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Ware, “Silence and Glory” (broadcast lecture), 3:56-4:12. (Gregory Palamas was eventually consecrated Archbishop of Thessalonika.)

¹⁷² Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 343.

¹⁷³ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 333.

According to Ware, the essence/energies distinction has become adopted as an indispensable dogma by the entire Orthodox Church. It has acquired ecumenical authority even though it was formally proclaimed by a few local councils of Constantinople in the 14th century.¹⁷⁴ To him, “it is impossible to understand *any aspect* of Orthodox theology or spirituality without taking into account the dogma of the distinction-in-unity between the essence of God and his uncreated energies.”¹⁷⁵

From the Synodical Tome of Constantinople 1351, as recorded by Ware, we learn that the distinction between God’s essence and energy or energies (singular and plural is equally legitimate, it claims) is within God. This distinction

does not in any way impair the divine simplicity; there is no “compositeness” in God. [...] The essence enjoys a certain priority or superiority in relation to the energies, in the sense that the energies proceed from the essence. [...] Man can participate in God’s energies but not in his essence. [...] The divine energies may be experienced by men in the form of light – a light which, though beheld through men’s bodily eyes, is in itself non-material, “intelligible” and uncreated.¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, the council claims several times, in affinity with the Cappadocians, that the divine energies are always shared by the three divine persons and should never be associated exclusively with only one of them.¹⁷⁷

Ware emphasizes that Constantinople 1351 explicitly states that the essence/energies distinction exists “‘not only from our viewpoint’, but ‘in the natural order itself’, that is, in the

¹⁷⁴ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 54; “Hidden and Revealed”, 136.

¹⁷⁵ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 136 (my emphasis). This is surely strong words: “impossible to understand any aspect” of Orthodoxy without the essence/energies distinction. Yet, such an affirmation would rather apply, it seems to me, mainly to contemporary Orthodox theology since Lossky (cf. e.g. Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood”, 357; McGuckin, “On the Mystical Theology” (transcribed lecture), right after the middle; Demacopoulos, “Mystery of Divine/Human Communion”, 278; Williams, “Theology of Lossky”, 8). It is evident that the essence/energies distinction through most of history has not been thought of as so immensely important for Orthodox theology that it would be “impossible to understand any aspect” of it without this “dogma”. Rather, Orthodox theology has expressed itself throughout most centuries without such a strong emphasis on the essence/energies distinction – the great exceptions being the 14th and the 20th centuries. The Palamites after Palamas in the 14th and 15th centuries were almost unanimously claiming that the distinction “should or, at least, might be” interpreted as “notional” (*kath’ epinoian*) (Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 369; see further, 280-370, esp. 280, 282-286, 292-293, 304, 333, 344-345, 369-370). After the 15th century, the distinction between God’s essence and energies did not play a prominent role in Orthodox theology, but was revived only in the 20th century by Lossky and others. Ware himself consequently speaks of “centuries of neglect” and affirms (in 1975) that “the Palamite teaching has now been rediscovered by Orthodox theologians in our own day and rightly restored to a central position” (Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 129). It could therefore be possible to claim, in contrast to Ware, that Palamas and the neo-Palamites are the minority in the history of the Orthodox tradition.

¹⁷⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 130.

¹⁷⁷ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 130.

being of God.” Thus, he says, the Orthodox tradition indeed regards the essence/energies distinction as “real” and “objective”, and not merely notional.¹⁷⁸

Considering its origin, Ware traces the essence/energies distinction “at least as far” as Philo of Alexandria. The theme is adopted from him by Clement of Alexandria and later affirmed by Athanasios of Alexandria. Basil the Great developed the distinction more fully.¹⁷⁹ It is further affirmed by Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor.¹⁸⁰ However, Gregory Palamas is the “thinker” who has provided “the most systematic exposition” of this distinction. In the Cappadocians it is “found in a less clear-cut form. Certainly Palamas gives to their teaching a greater precision, but I [Ware] see here a legitimate development rather than a distortion.”¹⁸¹

Reason and antinomy

According to Ware our human reason is a gift from God which is “to be used to the full within [... its] proper sphere; [... but it is] damaged by sin, both original and personal, and it therefore requires to be healed and transfigured by divine grace.” However, reason does not, writes Ware, “constitute the only or even the most important means that man has for apprehending spiritual truth.”¹⁸² So, even though Ware emphasizes our faculty of discursive reason, with its logics and scientific methods, he states that “theology cannot be restricted to these rules and methods, since God is not an ‘object’ similar in kind to the objects investigated by the natural sciences.”¹⁸³ According to Ware, both the Church fathers as well as modern Orthodox theologians (including Lossky) emphasize and utilize reason as a gift of God and strive to be coherent and intelligible, while insisting on God’s incomprehensibility and our human limitations.¹⁸⁴

In apprehending spiritual truth there are more important means than reason, says Ware, because the truths of the divine realm lies beyond its grasp. Humans are not restricted to discursive reason, but have powers of understanding superior to it. Ware affirms the mediaeval western distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* (discursive reason and spiritual understanding) and their Greek patristic equivalents *dianoia* and *nous*. Whereas *ratio* works

¹⁷⁸ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134.

¹⁷⁹ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 160-161 (quote 160).

¹⁸⁰ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 129.

¹⁸¹ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 161.

¹⁸² Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 46.

¹⁸³ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 49.

¹⁸⁴ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 50.

by abstract concepts and discursive reasoning, and by investigating and analysing objects external to itself, the spiritual intellect works by intuition and direct experience and thus acquire knowledge of the inner *logoi* of things. Such an experience is made possible “through participating in the divine energies which bring all things into existence and maintain them in being [... and] through an inward union with the divine Logos himself.”¹⁸⁵

Thus, the theologian should not be restricted to *ratio* or *dianoia*, but must transcend the conceptual limitations and rise to the level of *intellectus* or *nous*. One of the means of making this transition is by using antinomic theology, that is, “the affirmation of two statements both of which convey some meaning to his *ratio*, but which – regarded exclusively on the level of the discursive reasoning – cannot be fully reconciled.”¹⁸⁶ Antinomy thus helps us to overcome the temptation of adopting a deceptive reconciliation by means of the *ratio* alone. Only through spiritual understanding, claims Ware, we are able to contain and harmonize an antinomy, and hence reach “beyond the philosophical structures of our human logic, to the living God.”¹⁸⁷

Throughout his articles Ware uses “antinomy” and “paradox” as equivalent terms – sometimes he even uses “contradiction” – but what he really means is only that the two affirmations of the antinomy cannot be fully reconciled on the level of *ratio* alone.¹⁸⁸ In fact, he claims that the two affirmations are only “apparently conflicting”:

In saying that the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist possess an “antinomic” character, we do not of course mean that these doctrines are totally unintelligible. They are not irrational but supra-rational. Because God transcends the world and therefore also our “rational” understanding, no single, logically consistent description of him is ever adequate. One statement must be qualified by another. However subtle and elaborate our philosophical analysis, we are in the end obliged to “say and unsay”, to affirm *apparently conflicting statements*: God is one and God is three; Christ is a divine person, and yet he is truly man; the consecrated elements do not cease to be physically bread and wine, and yet they are the Body of the Logos. In similar fashion the essence-energies distinction also possesses an “antinomic” character.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 50.

¹⁸⁶ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 51.

¹⁸⁷ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 51. The wordings “philosophical structures” refer to an article by Rowan Williams with which Ware explicitly debates: “The Philosophical Structures of Palamism”.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 46, 51.

¹⁸⁹ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 48-49 (my emphasis). By “say and unsay” Ware refers to a quote of John Henry Newman: “saying and unsaying to a positive effect” (47).

From this it seems to me that even though Ware explicitly refers to Lossky when assessing the concept of antinomy,¹⁹⁰ he has a softer and more dynamic understanding of it; because whereas Lossky pushes every doctrinal formulation into as a direct contradiction as is possible, Ware claims that they are only *apparently conflicting* and cannot be *fully* reconciled *exclusively* on the level of *ratio*. Thus, Ware's opinion is closer to the Greek fathers than the opinion of Lossky, I would contend, and this is also true in his assessment of reason and rationality.

However, without the use of antinomic theology Ware fears that we might “rest satisfied with a strictly ‘logical’ and ‘rational’ theology” and thus “risk making idols out of our finite, human concepts.” In order to “shatter these idols” antinomy is of help, since it points “beyond logic and discursive reason, to the living reality of the infinite and uncreated God.”¹⁹¹ He fears that without “the antinomic dimension of theology, the danger is that we shall never ascend to the level of spiritual understanding at all.”¹⁹²

Yet, as we have seen, Ware also affirms that antinomic theology is only *one* of the means to ascend beyond logic and discursive reason, and I am inclined to add: not necessarily the most universally efficient. According to the Orthodox saints, I would argue, continuous prayer and sorrow for one's sins are far more central for anyone's ascension to the level of spiritual understanding.¹⁹³ The affirmation of two opposing truths only reconcilable through contemplation, while not at the level of reason, might help many persons towards a spiritual apprehension of God, and thus antinomy may have an important part to play in traditional theology. But it seems to me that one should not overestimate its role, since it is only one means among others (as Ware himself explains) and since its efficiency to some extent might be determined by other factors, such as previous experience, pre-knowledge and culture. It might simply not work very well for everyone everywhere.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 47-48.

¹⁹¹ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 47.

¹⁹² Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 51.

¹⁹³ E.g. Symeon the New Theologian, Seraphim of Sarov and Silouan the Athonite (see e.g. Symeon the New Theologian, *Divine Eros: Hymns of St Symeon the New Theologian*, and, *Practical and Theological Chapters*; Seraphim of Sarov “The Spiritual Instructions”; Archimandrite Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite*). According to Ware himself, Orthodox theology counts with the authority of the saints (“Scholasticism and Orthodoxy”, 20).

¹⁹⁴ If there might be a danger in *not* using antinomy in theology, there might also be a danger in *using* it, I would suggest; and especially so in our contemporary western cultures, because it might make Christian theology appear as just an odd, irrational, dispensable and insignificant curiosum of the past. It is not at all certain that an antinomic theology is the most efficient way to guide someone to a Christian experience of the divine mysteries today. It seems to me that the contemporary believer might need to acquire a proper apprehension of Christian spirituality and contemplation *before* she or he can be able to ascend through the antinomic way, because there is little chance that antinomic theology without a such a proper grasp and at least some prior experience will ever lead to the level of spiritual understanding at all. Without any former apprehension and experience of Christian spirituality, theological antinomies will assumingly appear as mere nonsense.

Apophaticism and the essence/energies distinction

If antinomy is only one of the means for making the transition to a spiritual apprehension of God, apophaticism is “necessary” for theology, Ware affirms, in order to “prevent our verbal formulae or mental concepts from becoming idols that keep us from the living God”.¹⁹⁵ Ware emphasizes that the concept of apophaticism can have two profoundly different meanings, and it is crucial to know on which level it is being used. On the one hand, it can denote the negating of every positive statement of God, which does not need to imply anymore than a verbal or philosophical exercise, but in the usage of the Greek fathers it signifies

the basis or springboard for a leap beyond all language and discursive thinking. Through their negations they seek to surpass words and concepts, to reach out towards the transcendent, and so to attain an unmediated, supra-rational experience of the Divine.¹⁹⁶

So even though the form of apophaticism is negative, Ware continues, it “is supremely affirmative in its ultimate aim.” In negating every notion of the divine reality, the theologian does not end up with nothing, but with “an immediate realization of God’s presence”¹⁹⁷ – “an immediate experience of the living God.”¹⁹⁸

Apophaticism, then, is both negative and affirmative, Ware affirms. It underlines God’s transcendence and incomprehensibility, but proclaims at the same time the possibility of an unmediated union – face to face – with this inaccessible God. To express that God is both transcendent and immanent, hidden and revealed, Orthodox theology, he states, makes a distinction between God’s essence (*ousia*) and energies or operations (*energeiai*).¹⁹⁹

In his essence God is infinitely transcendent, utterly beyond all created being, beyond all understanding and all participation from the human side. But in his energies – which are nothing else than God himself in action – God is inexhaustibly immanent, maintaining all things in being, animating them, making each of them a sacrament of his dynamic presence.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 127.

¹⁹⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 127-128.

¹⁹⁷ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128.

¹⁹⁸ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128; cf. *Orthodox Way*, 21-22.

²⁰⁰ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 160.

To Ware, “the distinction between God’s essence and his energies is an objective differentiation within God himself”.²⁰¹ Yet, at the same time, he claims that “the energies are not a part or division of God, but they are severally and individually the whole deity, *God in his entirety*”; they are nothing other than “*God himself*, God in action, God in his self-revelation, God indwelling his creation through his direct and unmediated presence.”²⁰²

However, I wonder whether it is plausible to affirm an eternal objective differentiation between God’s essence and energies, if both are equally “*God in his entirety*”. As we will see, Staniloae and the Greek fathers in Tollefsen’s assessment have a different point of view. They differentiate, rather, between God’s eternal movement *ad intra*, which is *identical to the essence*, and his movement towards creation – that is, God as he comes to meet us *on our creaturely level*. Thus, in the reception of Staniloae and Tollefsen, the Greek fathers offer a different perspective than Ware, who does not seem to have a conception of any activity within God’s essence. To him, the “essence signifies the whole God as he is in himself; the energies signify the whole God as he is in action”,²⁰³ that is, both eternally and in creation.

According to Ware, God’s *ousia* “remains for ever above and beyond all participation and all knowledge on the part of any creature, both in this age and in the Age to Come; [... it] can be apprehended neither by men nor by angels”.²⁰⁴ This radical unknowability, Ware claims, “is of course axiomatic for Orthodox theology”.²⁰⁵

Yet, at the same time, Ware affirms that the energies of God manifest and proclaim the unknowable essence.²⁰⁶ I find this somewhat puzzling because I am at loss to see how God’s essence can be “for ever above and *beyond* [...] *all knowledge* on the part of any creature” (as quoted above) if it is manifested and proclaimed by his energies.²⁰⁷ If the energies manifest and proclaim God’s essence to us, it should follow that we at least would get a tiny sense of, or a pointer to, what his essence might be about, and hence it would not be “*beyond all knowledge*”. It does not seem likely, I think, that Ware would mean that the energies are truly

²⁰¹ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 49.

²⁰² Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 165 (Ware’s emphasis). Here, Ware has obviously only slightly revised the words from his almost 30 years earlier article “God Hidden and Revealed”, 135.

²⁰³ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22.

²⁰⁴ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128; cf. 126.

²⁰⁵ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134.

²⁰⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 131, 133.

²⁰⁷ Vladimir Lossky also affirms, occasionally, that the uncreated energies manifest the nature (*Mystical Theology*, 74). But it seems to me that Lossky, in this case, uses “nature” in the same sense as when he affirms that we may become partakers of the divine nature, i.e. as equivalent to “God himself”, and not as “nature properly so-called”. More regularly Lossky affirms that the energies simply manifest God himself (e.g. 70, 74-75, 80-81). To Lossky, *the nature properly so-called is not manifested “in any way”* (72 [my emphasis]).

It does not seem to me that Ware uses “essence”, here, in the same sense as Lossky occasionally uses “nature”, i.e. as God himself; rather Ware seems to mean that the very essence of God is manifested by his energies.

manifesting the essence, while the creatures are in no position to receive anything of this manifestation, due to their creaturely limitation. Rather, it would perhaps be helpful to distinguish, with the Cappadocian brothers Basil and Gregory, in the assessment of Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, between “essence” as the unknowable definition of God and “essence” as that of which we may truthfully, yet not accurately, affirm certain properties, such as goodness, life, light, etc.²⁰⁸ If so, Ware could mean that the essence, as the definition of God, is beyond all knowledge, while the essence, as that which in some sense corresponds to the properties we affirm of it, is manifested by the energies. However, this is mere speculation. To me, Ware seems to remain rather ambiguous on the point. Perhaps he only means that the energies manifest and proclaim *that there is* a divine essence at all?

Another thing that might seem ambiguous in Ware is that he occasionally speaks about God’s “inner essence”,²⁰⁹ “inner nature”,²¹⁰ the “inner being of God”,²¹¹ and even “God’s inner being or *ousia*.”²¹² Yet, even if these quotes, ripen out of their context, might sound like the awkward statement that God has an “inner *ousia*” in contrast to an “outer *ousia*” – as a division of being – Ware has no intention of affirming this. What Ware wants to affirm, which is fairly clear from the contexts, is rather that the “inner essence”, “inner nature” or “inner being or *ousia*” of God is the very *ousia* or “God in himself” – in contrast to God in his energies. This is especially clear when he writes that “the Orthodox tradition draws a distinction between the essence, nature or *inner being* of God, on the one hand, and his energies, operations or acts of power, on the other.”²¹³ Thus, God’s “outer being”, though never mentioned by Ware, would not correspond to an “outer *ousia*”, but to his energies. One may wonder, though, why Ware is so unwarranted and utilizes such odd expressions as “inner essence”, “inner nature” and “inner being or *ousia*”, which apparently may seem to beg the question about the character of this inner *ousia* in relation to a supposed outer *ousia*, or to the *ousia* in its totality.

Considering God’s energies in creation, Ware affirms that they are “God as he communicates himself in outgoing love.”²¹⁴ Through this communication God is “at the heart of everything; [...] more intimate to us than we are to our own selves.”²¹⁵ Ware writes:

²⁰⁸ Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, 168-169, 222-223.

²⁰⁹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 126.

²¹⁰ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 125.

²¹¹ Ware, “The Hesychasts”, 250.

²¹² Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134.

²¹³ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 21-22 (my emphasis).

²¹⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 126.

²¹⁵ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 157.

The whole cosmos is a vast burning bush, permeated but not consumed by the uncreated fire of the divine energies. These energies are “God with us”. They are the power of God at work within man, the life of God in which he shares.²¹⁶

In line with Palamas, Ware identifies several biblical words with the uncreated energies, such as, God’s grace, power and kingdom. To Ware, the “identification of *energeia* with *charis* is of particular importance, and shows that the Orthodox teaching on the divine energies embodies a theology of grace.”²¹⁷ He also identifies the energies with love and claims that when “Palamas refers to the divine energies, what he means is *nothing else than love in action*.”²¹⁸

Not surprisingly Palamas is a recurrent source when Ware treats the essence/energies distinction. Ware follows Palamas in distinguishing between the “union in essence” of the three persons of God, the “hypostatic union” of the two natures of Christ, and the “union ‘according to energy’” of the saints with God.²¹⁹ While the divine persons are united in the single essence of God, and the human and divine natures in the single hypostasis of Christ, the multiplicity of human persons in union with God does neither bring about a single *ousia* nor a single hypostasis. In contrast, the deified humans who participate fully and entirely in God’s uncreated energies retain the distinctiveness of their hypostasis and *ousia*. In this way, Ware affirms, the Orthodox tradition avoids pantheism and safeguards the full personhood of each deified human.²²⁰

To Ware, the mystical experience of union with God is a personal “meeting of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’”. This is a union without confusion in which the human draws close to the Thou and even becomes “a part of the ‘Thou’”, yet without being annihilated or confused.²²¹

The need for the distinction

According to Ware, the essence/energies distinction is made in Orthodox theology in order to express the immediate union with God while safeguarding the deified persons from being

²¹⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 129.

²¹⁷ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 131.

²¹⁸ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 168 (my emphasis).

²¹⁹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 132; cf. *Orthodox Way*, 125.

²²⁰ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 132; cf. *Orthodox Way*, 22-23, 125-126.

²²¹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 132.

swallowed by God.²²² It emphasizes God's omnipresence in creation without compromising the ontological gap between creature and Creator.²²³

To Ware, the distinction is especially important since there actually are, he claims, some Christian theologians who promote a merely nominalistic understanding of our union with God and others that blur the distinction between created and uncreated, so that our union with God would seem to entail confusion, absorption, or "even annihilation of the creature in the abyss of the divinity."²²⁴

Ware emphasizes that we are not allowed to affirm only the immediate union with *or* the radical distinction from God, because then we will end up in either pantheism or nominalism. The essence/energies distinction manages to affirm *both* at once. It expresses both the negative and affirmative aspects of the apophatic way without capsizing into either side.²²⁵

The distinction also expresses, Ware claims, that our rational knowledge of God is limited in a more radical way than our rational knowledge of our fellow humans. To him, it "is not sufficient to say that we do not know God with the same kind of knowledge as he has of himself, for that is also true of our knowledge of other human persons."²²⁶ Since God is beyond creation we must indicate that God is uniquely unknowable to us. However, at the same time we may acquire genuine knowledge of him through our spiritual *nous*. The essence/energies distinction is needed, therefore, to express that God is both unknowable and knowable.²²⁷

To Ware, the unmediated communion with God is on another level than "the level of our normal experience of ourselves and of the world."²²⁸ There is no need for the essence/energies distinction, he affirms, when we consider our "union" (Ware's quotation marks)²²⁹ with other created persons or objects, because it is "quite clear in our minds that these objects or persons do not literally 'become' ourselves, nor do we literally 'become' them."²³⁰ From this, it follows by implication that Ware seems to think that it is *not* clear in our minds that we do not literally become God in our union with him.

²²² Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 53-54; "Hidden and Revealed", 132; *Orthodox Way*, 22-23, 126.

²²³ Ware, "Immanent yet Transcendent", 161.

²²⁴ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 53. I doubt, though, that there are Christian theologians who promote the idea of the believer's annihilation in God. And if there would exist such theologians, I would certainly hesitate to call them Christians, since this idea seems to contradict, I think, the fundamental implications of the Christian doctrine of creation.

²²⁵ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 53; "Hidden and Revealed", 128.

²²⁶ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 49.

²²⁷ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 49-50.

²²⁸ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 52.

²²⁹ I wonder what Ware means by using quotation marks for "union" in the realm of creation. Does he imply that there can be no real union on this level? Is it only a nominalistic union, a "union so-called"?

²³⁰ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 53.

To him, both the immediacy and the distinction between Creator and creature need to be emphasized and clarified when considering our “union with God, in a way that is not necessary when considering man’s normal awareness of the external world and human persons.”²³¹ Therefore, Ware seems to think that both the union and distinction are more profound in our relation to God than in relation to creatures.

Furthermore, with words that cannot be anything other than a paraphrase on a sentence of Lossky, although no reference is provided,²³² Ware writes:

If [...] we overlook the distinction between essence and energy, we shall not be able to fix any clear line of demarcation between the procession of the three persons and the creation of the world; both will be regarded equally as acts of the divine nature.²³³

First of all, we must note the unfortunate change Ware has made to Lossky’s original quote: Whereas Lossky simply writes “the procession of the divine persons”, Ware writes “the procession of the *three* persons” – thus implying that even the Father proceeds from the essence. This surely makes the divine essence ontologically prior in relation to the persons and even implies the agency of the essence in the procession of the Father.²³⁴

As Tollefsen has made clear, a more fruitful way of describing the demarcation between the procession of the divine persons and the creation of the world may be to simply differentiate between the activity *ad intra* and *ad extra* of the same divine essence.²³⁵ These two ways of acting is, I would contend, so totally different that it is quite odd to juxtapose them the way Lossky and Ware do. The one is an *eternal* act with the Father (not the *ousia*) as its very *arche*, whereas the other is a *temporal* act common to the three divine persons. Thus, the “clear line of demarcation” mentioned by Ware is so obvious that I am at loss to see how Lossky and Ware can even suggest a possible equality of these two acts.²³⁶

Given Lossky’s conception of God’s essence as the totally repose and remote, featureless tri-unitarian super-essence, it is understandable that the acts of such an essence

²³¹ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 53-54.

²³² Quoted above, 33-33 (Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73-74). Ware’s words are almost a verbatim rendering of Lossky, who in turn refers to Palamas’ *Capita physica* for this insight. Ware might simply have forgotten to add the note.

²³³ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 133.

²³⁴ According to the famous de Régnon thesis, not even Latin philosophy conceives of the essence as the agent in God (Theodore de Régnon, in: Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 57-58).

²³⁵ Cf. Tollefsen, above 34, and “Appendix”, below.

²³⁶ For further criticism of this proposition, as it is found in Palamas; see Williams, “Philosophical Structures”, 33-34. See also Zizioulas’ criticism of the Nicene formulation of a procession “from the substance of the Father” (*Communion and Otherness*, 120, see further Ch. 3, esp. 119-130, 139-140).

would only cause divinity and that Lossky, therefore, needs the energies as eternally outside the essence to make it possible for God to create something outside of himself. Yet, I am not sure whether Ware's conception of the essence/energies distinction may justify this in the way that Lossky's conception does.

An epistemological or ontological distinction?

According to Ware, theologians of the West often argue that the essence/energies distinction has "some validity on the level of epistemology, [but] should not be projected onto that of metaphysics." They claim that it is

right to insist, in common with earlier Patristic tradition, that our knowledge of God remains always incomplete, and that there is an aspect of God's being that remains forever inaccessible to our human understanding, even in the Age to Come; but [... it is] wrong to externalize this limitation in man's understanding and to treat it as a distinction *within God himself*.²³⁷

To this Ware answers by emphasizing, as we have seen, that the Orthodox tradition indeed regards this distinction as "real" and "objective", and not merely notional. The council of Constantinople 1351, he claims, explicitly states that this distinction exists "not only from our viewpoint', but 'in the natural order itself', that is, in the being of God."²³⁸

At the same time, Ware states that the Orthodox tradition grounds this knowledge on that which we may only "dimly comprehend" of God, that is, "his action and self-revelation *ad extra*".²³⁹ All we have access to, says Ware, is the level of epistemology through God's self-disclosure; we can never pass beyond to the level of metaphysics. Our knowledge of the divine persons is based on God's self-disclosure and we are equally right to infer the eternal essence/energies distinction within God on the same basis. But as a caution, he adds: "All human language about God is inadequate, but it is certainly less misleading to affirm the distinction than to deny it."²⁴⁰

It seems to me that this argumentation is not entirely consistent, because it is not clear to me how we may say anything at all about a distinction between essence and energies within

²³⁷ Ware, "Hidden and Revealed", 134 (Ware's emphasis).

²³⁸ Above, 42-43 (Ware, "Hidden and Revealed", 134).

²³⁹ Ware, "Hidden and Revealed", 134.

²⁴⁰ Ware, "Hidden and Revealed", 134.

God, if we may only “dimly comprehend” God’s energies *ad extra* and may not have any comprehension whatsoever of his essence.

Ware makes clear that we have access to God only through his self-disclosure, through which we learn that God *in his energies ad extra* is both immanent and transcendent. At the same time we learn *nothing at all* about God’s essence. Thus, Ware seems to argue that since we learn that God in his energies *ad extra* is both hidden and revealed, we are in a position to determine that there is a real distinction *within God* between his *ousia*, totally beyond our grasp, and his *energeiai*, knowable yet unknowable. To me, this is not a very strong argument.

Ironically, the apophatically inclined Ware (just like Lossky) makes a truth claim about a distinction concerning the divine sphere which is above all knowledge. Although acknowledging that we may only dimly comprehend God’s energies *ad extra*, he is daring enough to affirm a distinction that does not only concern these dimly known energies, but also the completely unknowable essence.

In the 1970s Ware was involved in a debate about Palamism. One of his adversaries, the Anglican Rowan Williams, argued that Palamas “has hardened a somewhat *ad hoc* epistemological point into an *ontological differentiation* really present in God”.²⁴¹ In his reply to Williams, Ware wonders whether “the term ‘real distinction’, as understood in Western scholasticism, correspond[s] precisely to what Palamas was trying to say”, and whether we thus are “in danger of introducing [...] Latin scholastic categories, foreign to the Greek Patristic tradition”.²⁴² Furthermore, he questions whether the Greek fathers actually made such a sharp contrast between epistemology and ontology as Williams implies, presupposing these western categories.²⁴³

Thus, instead of offering a clear answer to Williams’ proposition, Ware simply poses a few questions about whether it is proper to interpret Palamism with the tools of Latin scholasticism. In answering Williams, Ware simply writes: “I will content myself with asking three questions”.²⁴⁴ But why does he content himself with this? To me, this is surprising and somewhat disappointing, because it seems to me that the question of the precise character of the relationship between God’s essence and energies is crucial to the establishment of a traditionally defensible and philosophically sound conception of the essence/energies distinction. When Ware acknowledges and even quotes Williams’ criticism, why does he not

²⁴¹ Williams, cited in: Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 59 (my emphasis) (orig. Williams, “Philosophical Structures”, 44).

²⁴² Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 59.

²⁴³ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 60.

²⁴⁴ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 59. Yet, the questions are actually more than three.

bother to sort things out? Does he think that the question is too philosophically oriented to answer?²⁴⁵ Or is it because he thinks the question presupposes Latin scholastic categories and, therefore, requires an answer within the realm of these categories, an answer which Ware is not willing to give?²⁴⁶ Or did he just feel that the question was too complex to answer within the context of the ongoing debate, as he was pressed by the publication deadline?²⁴⁷

After his retorting questions to Williams, Ware simply expresses the opinion, though without providing any argument, that epistemology and ontology are certainly related:

a distinction on the level of our understanding is valueless if it has no objective or ontological basis. If we say [...] that God is unknowable in a unique sense, we are not merely making a statement about the limitations of our human understanding, but a statement about God himself.²⁴⁸

To me, these two quoted sentences are rather problematic. I will return to the first of these sentences below, and treat the latter of them first. In this latter sentence, Ware emphasizes that he is making “a statement *about God himself*” and not merely about “our human understanding”, which would mean that the statement actually concerns *God as he is irrespectively of creation*. But to say that *God himself is uniquely unknowable irrespectively of creation* is, I would contend, both daring and rather odd.

Firstly, I am at loss to see how God himself, *irrespectively of creation*, can be “unknowable in a *unique* sense”, because apart from creation the relational term “unique” seems to lose its meaning. The statement that God’s unknowability is *unique* irrespectively of creation is, it seems to me, utterly meaningless and rather odd.

Secondly, since the statement is “about God himself”, it seems to proclaim that *God is unknowable as an inherent feature of his being*; but this would imply that he, in fact, is *unknowable to himself*, because if we only consider God himself, apart from creation, he could certainly not be unknowable to anyone else. One may therefore wonder whether this is a plausible statement from a traditional Christian point of view.

²⁴⁵ Ware writes: “Those who approach Palamism from an exclusively philosophical viewpoint [...] will inevitably miss the true meaning of what Palamas is trying to say”; “it is by [...] experiential criteria that his teaching should be assessed in our own day” (“Debate about Palamism”, 58, 63).

²⁴⁶ According to Ware, East and West do not agree on theological method, since it was altered in the West through the rise of scholasticism. Ware writes that “before we can profitably discuss the distinction between the Essence and Energies of God [...] we must agree about our theological method” (“Scholasticism and Orthodoxy”, 18-19, quote 18).

²⁴⁷ Ware’s reply was publ. in the same combined issue as Williams’ article, namely, *Eastern Churches Review*, 9:1-2 (1977).

²⁴⁸ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 60.

Thirdly, in order to make such a claim “about God himself”, apart from “our human understanding”, one needs, from the apophatic point of view that Ware himself promotes, to have immensely good reasons; and I can not see that Ware has provided any evidence that are strong enough to reinforce such a claim. As we have seen, Ware himself affirms that we know nothing about God except what we may dimly comprehend of his self-revelation.

Returning to the first sentence of the quotation above, Ware proclaims that any “distinction on the level of our understanding is valueless if it has no objective or ontological basis.” Here, one might wonder whether Ware conceives of “objective” and “ontological” as two different concepts or as synonymous. Furthermore, one might wonder how exactly he understands the concept “ontological”.

From the context and the construction of the sentence it seems to be most likely, I think, that Ware has intended to line up a couple of synonyms (in the same generous manner as he uses antinomy, paradox and contradiction as synonyms). But whereas every ontological distinction, obviously, is an objective distinction as well, I can not see that the opposite is true. It would be quite odd, I think, to speak of the distinction between, for instance, the numbers 3 and 5 as ontological; yet we must certainly acknowledge that their distinction is objective.

However, from the context of the quote I would contend that Ware with an “objective or ontological basis” simply means a basis in “reality itself”.²⁴⁹ Thus, what Ware really wants to affirm seems to be this: Epistemological distinctions are valueless if they do not refer to any distinction in reality itself. Yet, whereas such an affirmation may be all right in many cases (though I wonder how far things such as numbers, ideas and fantasy creatures may be said to be distinguished in “reality itself”), I am curious about whether every distinction in “reality itself” may properly be labelled “ontological”. Would it be reasonable to say that there is an ontological distinction between, say, married and unmarried women, a sculpture and its form or the two sides of a paper? Since ontological statements in theology generally are about natures and not simply about anything which may be said to be real,²⁵⁰ I would answer in the negative. Therefore, I would also argue that Ware is mistaken in equating “ontological distinction” with any distinction in “reality itself”.

²⁴⁹ “What does it mean to say that a distinction, as that between the essence and energies of God, is valid when applied to our understanding of reality, and yet not valid when applied to the *reality itself*? Surely the two levels are related; a distinction on the level of our understanding is valueless if it has no *objective or ontological basis*” (Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 60 [my emphasis]).

²⁵⁰ Cf. Zizioulas, below; and the Ch. on Staniloae, subch. “Ontological or epistemological?”, below.

Yet, Ware's equation between ontology and reality makes it easy to grasp why he can affirm that the essence/energies distinction is ontological – because with such an equation even the distinction between what God is and does may be labelled “ontological”; for surely it would be plausible to say that what one is and does refer to different things in reality itself.

According to Zizioulas, there “seems to be a widespread assumption that the term ‘being’ [in its ontological sense] denotes the *ousia* or substance or essence of God”.²⁵¹ This is apparently true for Staniloae,²⁵² and it is certainly my impression too. It would be unlikely, I think, that Ware, with his philosophical interest and western background,²⁵³ is unaware of this convention. Thus, when Ware insinuates an ontological distinction – that is, a distinction of “*be-ing*” (Greek: *on*; thus “*onto-logical*”) – between the essence and energies of God, he would most probably be aware of that he may be thought to affirm that the divine energies are something like an essence distinguished, yet, in union with the divine essence. But this would, of course, be totally unacceptable for Ware, as it was for Palamas too.²⁵⁴ I wonder, though, why Ware, given that the “widespread assumption” that ontology refers to natures should be fairly obvious to him, does not explain himself in relation to it. He could, just as Zizioulas does, simply have acknowledged it and then clarified that he does not agree with it for this or that reason. It escapes me why he simply chooses to ignore this common view. Is it because it seems to smack of western scholasticism, whereas he self-identify as Eastern Orthodox? Does he pretend to be a stranger to this view in order to mark his identity as non-western?²⁵⁵

However, to ascribe ontological status to what one does, as Ware seems to do, is not only unconventional, but also in conflict with the traditional Christian understanding of evil, I would contend, because such a position implicitly ascribes ontological status to evil activities as well. According to Orthodox tradition evil is void, says Ware, it is “not an existent being or substance”.²⁵⁶ This view is shared by Palamas who “certainly did not wish to ascribe to evil *any kind of ‘ontological’ status.*”²⁵⁷ Ware continues: “Evil is no more than a parasite, a twisting and distortion of things that, in their essential nature as created by God, are fundamentally good”.²⁵⁸ Yet, if activities in general are considered to have ontological status,

²⁵¹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 124-125 (quote 124).

²⁵² Cf. subch. “Ontological or epistemological?”, below.

²⁵³ Evidently Ware, for all his Orthodox identity, is an Englishman who was brought up in England, pursued theological and philosophical studies in England, and has been living and working primarily in England (cf. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 335-337).

²⁵⁴ Cf. Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 291.

²⁵⁵ Cf. above 53-54 incl. nn. 245-246.

²⁵⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 47 (verbatim in 58).

²⁵⁷ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 167 (my emphasis).

²⁵⁸ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 167.

then evil activities will need to have ontological status too; because there are, obviously, evil activities in the world.

To Ware, evil is “an illusion and *unreality*,”²⁵⁹ and therefore it lacks ontological status; yet, since evil activities certainly are a *reality* in the world, they must consequently be granted ontological status, according to Ware’s own scheme of thought. But it seems to be a novelty in Orthodox theology to deny ontological status to *evil* while granting it to *evil activities*. Yet, this is the immediate consequence of granting ontological status to activities in general. In equating ontology with reality, Ware is forced to grant ontological status to every real activity, including evil activities, because otherwise he would have to deny them reality too. This shows that the equation of ontology with reality is not easily maintained.

However, I would contend that what Ware really wants to affirm with his so-called “ontological” distinction between the essence and energies of God, is that there is an objective distinction in reality itself between what God is and does. Yet, while this may be plausible when referring to God’s “doings” in creation, I am not sure what this would mean for Ware when referring to the eternal activity of God.

Ware confidently affirms that there is an *eternal distinction* between the essence and energies within God himself. Yet, he also claims that the essence and energies are equally God in his entirety. This makes me wonder whether God’s eternal activity, for Ware, is constitutive in any way of God. If so, how can they be something other than the essence (given the conventional definition of essence, referred to above)²⁶⁰? If not, how can the energies be conceived of as God in his entirety?

Philosophical accuracy?

After wrestling with Ware’s opinion about the relation between God’s essence and energies for quite some time, I find it rather ironic to read his sweeping affirmation (from 1979, yet reaffirmed 1995) that “Orthodoxy” (i.e. not: many Orthodox theologians, but: Orthodoxy itself) “considers that the doctrine of the ‘double procession’, as commonly expounded, is theologically inexact and spiritually harmful.”²⁶¹ (Yet we should note that Ware has expressed

²⁵⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 47 (my emphasis).

²⁶⁰ According to which the essence is the “what” of God, God’s definition or whatever is constitutive of God (above 29).

²⁶¹ Ware, *Orthodox Way* (rev. ed. 1995), 32 (identical in 1st ed. 1979, 40).

his concerns about *filioque* in a more nuanced way elsewhere.)²⁶² In this sentence Ware manage to say three things, all of which have an ironic counterpart in his own work in the 1970s debate about Palamism.

(1) If someone would have refuted Palamism “as commonly expounded”, Ware would certainly have stated that this begs the question: Commonly expounded *by whom, where and when?* One needs to investigate every affirmation within their historical context, “for there are no ‘wrong answers’ as such, but only wrong answers to particular questions.”²⁶³ This is exactly how Ware himself confronts Rowan Williams’ criticism of Palamism.

(2) Irrespectively of whether it is true that many explications of the *filioque* “is theologically inexact”, theological exactness is precisely what is lacking in Ware’s own explication of the essence/energies distinction. In order to be *theologically exact*, it seems to me, one needs to embrace the *philosophical tools* available and, in order to make oneself understood to the reader, especially those philosophical tools that are in use by the addressees. But Ware chooses rather to refute the philosophical tools of “the other”, and argues that it was the Latin West that parted from the original theological method of the Church. Even though he is of western origin, living and working in the West, he seems to claim that the tools of Latin scholasticism is foreign to the Eastern Orthodox, and thus to himself.²⁶⁴ Therefore, he seems to be saying that although he (most probably) can speak the language of the other, he will not. Instead, the other will have to learn the theological tongue of Orthodoxy if any communication is to be made possible. I find this attitude quite astonishing, because it should not be any problem for such a smart and educated theologian as Ware to explain himself to the modern western reader with the tools of contemporary western philosophy.²⁶⁵ Besides, it is no news that the Church, throughout history, has shaped its way of expression in relation to the cultures in which it has been inculturated. Ware repeatedly emphasises that Palamas is an experiential theologian, not a philosopher, and should be interpreted as such. He writes that Palamas “frequently urged that what matters is not ‘words’ but ‘things’ or ‘realities’.”²⁶⁶ But even if this might be true to some degree about Palamas (though Ware certainly overstates his

²⁶² On his more resent and sober reflections about *filioque*, see the 3rd ed. of his *Orthodox Church* (2015), 204-212, esp. 207-212 (and not the 1st publication [1963], which presents a rather different picture, 218-223, esp. 221-223). Ware rewrote about a third of the book in 1993 (Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 337).

²⁶³ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 57.

²⁶⁴ See above 54-54 incl. nn. 245-246; “Debate about Palamism”, 58, 63; “Scholasticism and Orthodoxy”, 18-19.

²⁶⁵ Andrew Louth is apparently impressed by Ware’s interest and competence in philosophy (*Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 335-336).

²⁶⁶ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 55 (quote), 58-59, 63.

case)²⁶⁷, it may not serve as an alibi for letting Orthodox theologians of today escape the rules of theology in our time, with its present conditions formed by western culture and academics. Irrespectively of whether one likes these rules or not, one has to *relate* to them in some way in order to make oneself comprehensible to the other.²⁶⁸ In marked contrast to Ware, Tollefsen writes that

when confronted with a theological challenge *one has to move into a philosophical exposition* of the correct teaching about God. In this regard one has to find illuminating strategies of speaking and arguing, even if the thing itself slips as a mystery beyond what we can master from our weak intellectual recourses.²⁶⁹

(3) Just as an awkward version of *filioque* might be “spiritually harmful”, so does an awkward version of Palamism, which is evident from all criticism that it has incurred through the centuries. Zizioulas, for instance, writes that “‘maximizing’ the role of divine energies may obscure the decisive significance of personhood for the God-world relationship – and this is, in fact, the case with many modern Orthodox theologians.”²⁷⁰

Thus, if Ware accepts no less than a historical and contextual critique of Palamism, and demands from the promoters of the *filioque* a theologically exact and spiritually edifying exposition, he must, in turn, make sure that he himself actually offers no less than a historical and contextual critique of *filioque* (which he actually has done more recently), and a theologically exact and spiritually edifying version of Palamism. Of the three theologians of this thesis it is certainly Ware himself, I would contend, who suffers the most from theological inexactness.

²⁶⁷ Recent scholarship has shown that Palamas had a foundational philosophical education which he used in the debates with Barlaam, Akindynos and Gregoras (e.g. Gunnarsson, *Mystical Realism*, 93-94; Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 53-57). According to Tollefsen, Palamas was forced by the controversy to exhibit the essence/energies distinction “in precise, philosophical language” (*Activity and Participation*, 195). Likewise, Gunnarsson claims that Palamas in his writings against Barlaam works on an abstract, theoretical and philosophical level, in contrast to the more practically oriented writings of the other hesychasts, such as, Gregory the Sinaite (*Mystical Realism*, 151, 160, 187-191, 252-253).

²⁶⁸ Here, Zizioulas is a fine example, and this might to some degree explain his great reception in the West.

²⁶⁹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 63 (my emphasis).

²⁷⁰ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 30; see further 139 n80.

DUMITRU STANILOAE

God as Person and Love

Dumitru Staniloae is often recognized as one of the most significant Orthodox theologians of the 20th century. Shortly before he passed away in 1993, Ware even wrote that he is “widely regarded as *the greatest* Orthodox theologian alive today”.²⁷¹ But in spite of this exceptional recognition he still awaits a proper reception.

In the assessment of prominent scholars, such as Kallistos Ware, John Meyendorff, Olivier Clément and Calinic Berger, Staniloae may be characterized by fearlessness,²⁷² which is evident in his “free and even liberal citations from theologians and thinkers from every era and orientation”,²⁷³ and in that he “presents the truth of his convictions – uncompromisingly – as a liberating solution for all rather than as judgement upon others.”²⁷⁴ However, his relaxed and independent attitude towards his contemporaries in the West, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, may to some degree have been aided by his isolation behind the Iron Curtain.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, ix (my emphasis). Olivier Clément has even called him “‘the greatest Orthodox theologian’ of our time” (quoted by Munteanu, “Staniloae’s Influence on Moltmann”, 28). Cf. Turcescu, “Staniloae, Dumitru”, 487.

²⁷² Meyendorff, Clément and Ware, in: Ware “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xxiv; Berger, “Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 137. Berger is certainly one of the most competent interpreters of Staniloae’s theology.

²⁷³ Berger, “Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 136; see further 137. Apart from the Church fathers, the recurring sources include: Pavel Florensky, Sergii Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Lossky, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Binswanger, Jacob Boehme, Max Scheler, Georg Koeppen, Karl Barth, Maurice Blondel, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

²⁷⁴ Meyendorff, in: Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xxiv.

²⁷⁵ Bordeianu, “(In)Voluntary Ecumenism”, 243-244.

Staniloae was deeply devoted to the spirituality of the *Philokalia* and devoted much effort to make it available to his Romanian sisters and brothers.²⁷⁶ All by himself he translated, greatly expanded, wrote introductions and richly annotated it,²⁷⁷ since none of his colleagues were interested in contributing to this work.²⁷⁸

The volume of Staniloae's production is huge – far greater than that of his contemporary Orthodox neo-patristic colleagues in the West;²⁷⁹ and the scope of his theological synthesis is similarly vast – integrating patristic, Byzantine and contemporary theology (including Protestant and Catholic), and philosophy too.²⁸⁰ Everything is united and interpreted through his characteristic personalism which is, as is generally acknowledged, central to his theological thought.²⁸¹

The final goal of the Christian life, as formulated by Staniloae, is “union with supreme Person”,²⁸² or, “direct and perfect communion with the Absolute as person, and in him, with all the persons of our fellow men.”²⁸³ In this union Christ is central,²⁸⁴ since he is the person of the Trinity who has become human and, therefore, may recapitulate all humans in himself “in order to lead them into the Trinity.”²⁸⁵

In contrast to Lossky and Ware, pantheism is not a real threat for Staniloae in his motivation for the essence/energies distinction. The Losskian notion that the presence of God's essence in creation would absorb everything created, seems to sit rather ill with Staniloae's theology. Moreover, whereas Lossky denies personal union for the risk of absorption, Staniloae emphasizes that *our union with God is primarily personal*. This union implies the confirmation of the other as person and, therefore, identification between the two is completely impossible. The more a couple of persons are united to each other in loving union, the more they confirm and appreciate each other as other.²⁸⁶

In Staniloae's theological style the whole vision of his theological landscape seems to be constantly present. Therefore, reading Staniloae one never really knows which content that

²⁷⁶ Cf. e.g. Bielawski, “Staniloae and His *Philokalia*”, esp. 51-52.

²⁷⁷ Berger, “Contemporary Synthesis of St Maximus”, 393-394, and “Dumitru Staniloae”, 397; Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 131-133, and “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology”, 55-58.

²⁷⁸ Bielawski, “Staniloae and His *Philokalia*”, 31.

²⁷⁹ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 132-133; Berger, “Dumitru Staniloae”, 393.

²⁸⁰ Berger, “Dumitru Staniloae”, 393.

²⁸¹ Berger, “Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 127, 133, and “Dumitru Staniloae”, 393, 395-396, 398; Louth, “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology”, 64-65, and *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 141-142; Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xix; Turcescu, “Staniloae, Dumitru”, 487; Bartos, *Deification*, 60.

²⁸² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 12.

²⁸³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 29.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 21; *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 28-29, 42.

²⁸⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 76.

²⁸⁶ Cf. Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 80-81; *Orthodox Spirituality*, 38-39, 50 (Koeppen's quotes), 52-53. Cf. below, subchs. “God is Supreme Person” and “Salvation as Personal Communion”.

will emerge under a certain heading. As Berger acknowledges “Staniloae often digresses (and his digressions contain some of his most creative thought)”.²⁸⁷ Louth even speaks about “a lack of clarity, a tolerance of a certain confusion, a certain muddle” – but this, however, is something good, according to Louth, and “characteristic of something experienced, rather than simply conceived.”²⁸⁸ However, in contrast with Louth, I do not think that Staniloae lacks clarity but, rather, it seems to me that the confusion and muddle, evident in Staniloae, are primarily due to his recurring digressions. One may even argue, I think, that Staniloae is far more clear than both Lossky and Ware but, at the same time, terribly more confusing and muddy; that is, more clear in the sense of presenting a well-argued, philosophically and logically coherent theology, and more confusing and muddy in the sense of continuously mixing and switching content.

The main sources for the essence/energies distinction in Staniloae are the two books *The Experience of God*, vol. 1 (of six vols. in the English ed. of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*; orig. publ. in three vols. in Romanian, 1978), and *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (orig. in Romanian, 1981; based on lectures from 1946)²⁸⁹. But since most of Staniloae’s works remain untranslated, one could, of course, wonder whether there exist more important works in Romanian. However, after reading a few works by Romanian scholars these two books seem to remain the most important sources.²⁹⁰ Even his famously untranslated pioneering monograph on Palamas seems to add little to his own understanding of the essence/energies distinction.²⁹¹

As is usually pointed out, Staniloae discovered and appreciated Palamas long before the neo-Palamite boom in the Orthodox world in the mid 20th century.²⁹² Already in the late 1920s he collected copies of unpublished manuscripts from different European libraries and started to labour with them, the fruit of which was his monograph, published in 1938.²⁹³ Thus, he was well acquainted with Palamas years before Lossky (as well as Basil Krivocheine or

²⁸⁷ Berger, “Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 146.

²⁸⁸ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 134.

²⁸⁹ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 130.

²⁹⁰ Yet, of course, there are a few non-translated works that I would have liked to consult: e.g. Staniloae’s introduction and footnotes to Palamas in his *Philokalia*, vol. 7 (recommended by Bielawski, “Staniloae and His *Philokalia*”, 48); and also the articles “Dumnezeu este Iubire” and “Sfantul Duh in Revelatie si in Biserica” (utilized by Bartos, *Deification*, 58-62 [incl. nn. available on 84-85]). However, Romanian scholar Adrian Agachi, whose goal is to establish Staniloae as a “neo-Palamite”, obviously draws mostly from the books I have mentioned (*Neo-Palamite Synthesis*).

²⁹¹ To the disappointment of Agachi (*Neo-Palamite Synthesis*, 45-46). The monograph simply records Palamas’ life and thought, as Agachi shows (Ch. 1, 38-58).

²⁹² Cf. e.g. Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xi-xii; Toma, “Staniloae and his Contribution”, 20-21.

²⁹³ Berger, “Contemporary Synthesis of Maximus”, 391-392; Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xi-xii.

John Meyendorff, for that matter) had published anything on the subject.²⁹⁴ Consequently, he developed the mainlines of his reception without much influence from his contemporaries.

In fact, one could argue that Staniloae's reception of Palamas is quite the opposite of Lossky's: For whereas Lossky draws much on Palamas in his explication of the essence/energies distinction but has a rather pessimistic estimation of rational thinking, Staniloae uses Palamas extensively in his more positive epistemology but explicates the essence/energies distinction without much reference to him.²⁹⁵

Yet, Staniloae writes that "Palamas did nothing more than hold fast to this [Eastern patristic] distinction between the *being* of God and the uncreated *operations*";²⁹⁶ but this makes it even more interesting that he hardly uses Palamas when actually explicating this very subject. In his chapter on the essence/energies distinction, "The Being of God and His Uncreated Operations",²⁹⁷ Palamas is in fact only mentioned once and there are no references to any of Palamas' writings, which might be rather surprising. Instead, Staniloae draws primarily on Dionysios the Areopagite and Maximos the Confessor.

Thus, to call Staniloae a "neo-Palamite", as some scholars do,²⁹⁸ is rather misleading, I contend, because the label "Palamism" refers primarily to *this particular distinction as it is formulated by Palamas*.²⁹⁹ Consequently, "neo-Palamism" is about *the reception of Palamas' version of this distinction*. Obviously, Staniloae promotes both the essence/energies distinction and St. Gregory Palamas, but this makes it all the more intriguing that he, in explicating this distinction, avoids the very formulations of Palamas himself.

As we have seen, it is generally agreed that Staniloae's personalism wholly governs his theology. And whereas the doctrine of God's operations is certainly important for Staniloae, their very *distinction* from God's essence is spelled out rather differently than in Lossky, for instance. Thus, given Lossky's great influence on subsequent Orthodox theology, it might be rather misleading to claim, as does Papanikolaou, that Staniloae affirms the "centrality" of the

²⁹⁴ Krivocheine published his study in Russian 1936, English publ. in 1938 (Ware, "Foreword", in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xii, xxv n4). Meyendorff's study appeared in 1959 and Lossky's work is from 1944 – both originally in French.

²⁹⁵ Staniloae refers to Palamas in quite a few topics, such as anthropology and angelology (*Experience of God*, vol. 2, 76-77, 83, 87-92, 120-124, 130-131), and especially in the topics of reason, apophaticism and the vision of the divine light (see below, subchs. "Rationality and three steps of apophaticism" and "Deification and divine light").

²⁹⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 125 (my emphasis). On Staniloae's preference for "being" and "operations", see subch. "The essence/energies distinction", below.

²⁹⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, Ch. 7, 125-139.

²⁹⁸ E.g. Toma, "Staniloae and his Contribution", 25; Agachi, *Neo-Palamite Synthesis*.

²⁹⁹ Cf. e.g. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 169. Revealingly, Ware answers Williams' critique of "Palamism" (which seems to include its modern interpreters) exclusively by referring to "Palamas" (Ware, "Debate about Palamism", esp. 57).

essence/energies distinction.³⁰⁰ Even if Papanikolaou's proposition might be true from a certain point of view (that is, exclusively interpreted through Staniloae's personalist framework), it is certainly likely to misrepresent Staniloae's original contribution to the understanding of this distinction. In order to appreciate his contribution, it must not be loaded with the Losskian heritage, but needs to be read with fresh eyes.³⁰¹

Therefore, I have found it necessary to structure this chapter differently than the previous. It will start with God as supreme Person and our personal union with him, since this is absolutely crucial for the interpretation of anything in Staniloae; it will work its way through the essence/energies distinction, to epistemology and apophaticism, and come to a close with the vision of the divine light.³⁰² This structure, I hope, will help us to never lose sight of the heart of Staniloae's theology, namely, God as loving community of absolute Persons and our deification through personal loving communion with this personal God.

God is supreme Person

For Staniloae, a person is characterized by being apophatic "in a general way and *par excellence* [...]. It transcends existence that can be perceived directly. It is perceived through its acts. It exists on another plane, one which transcends existence."³⁰³ This is true of every person, but "[o]nly the supreme personal reality is totally apophatic because only this reality is, in an eminent way, superexistent."³⁰⁴

A personal "I" or "Thou" can never be caught in concepts, Staniloae affirms. The knowledge revealed in a personal loving relationship "is superior to concepts. It is a direct, broader vision, of that which is the indefinite subject. Faced with it, concepts are like spoonfuls of water compared to a river or the sea."³⁰⁵ Only when love ceases one is left with the attributes and characteristics of the other, along with one's own judgement of these traits. In love the other is experienced as a whole, as light and joy, beyond any conceptually defined

³⁰⁰ Papanikolaou, "Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism", 533.

³⁰¹ On the severe differences between Staniloae and Lossky, see: Rogobete, "Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian Participation?". Yet, it seems to me that Rogobete might exaggerate his negative assessment of Lossky in favour of Staniloae. However, other interpreters presume the Losskian heritage in their assessment and, consequently, never really come to grips with Staniloae's position (e.g. Bartos, *Deification*, and Agachi, *Neo-Palamite Synthesis*).

³⁰² However, because of the limited scope of this thesis I will not treat Staniloae's notion of the divine *logoi* and their connection to the uncreated energies. In spite of this lacuna, I believe this thesis will provide a sound basis for a proper understanding of the *logoi* in Staniloae. Furthermore, there is an excellent study on this by Calinic Berger: "A Contemporary Synthesis of St Maximus' Theology: The Work of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae", 398-403.

³⁰³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 127.

³⁰⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 135.

³⁰⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 343.

attributes, but when this ecstatic relation ceases one is left with only superficially drawn concepts.³⁰⁶

As persons, human beings are created as irreducible “I’s”. Because of their irreducibility, persons remain as themselves – as a boundary for the other – even in the closest, most permanent union. The personal “I” is not identified with the other, but is preserved through the communion. This is true even in our union with God, “our created ‘I’ doesn’t become the divine ‘I’”.³⁰⁷

Since we are created as persons, irreducible “I’s”, we are free in relation to other persons – including supreme Person. We are not just enslaved by a “system of references” which forces us to transmit the actions of others and of nature itself. Instead, the supreme Personal reality gives us the possibility of freedom, or transcendence, in relation to the systems of references. By this freedom we shape ourselves and the world around us, and are, therefore, in a certain sense absolute, or “of ourselves”. Yet, only the supreme Personal reality is absolute, or “of himself”, properly speaking, since only supreme Person is completely free from any system of reference and exists from no other source, while everything exists from him. Only the total freedom of supreme Person guaranties the freedom of the human person.³⁰⁸

So, even God’s own existence beyond existence is “of himself”. But there cannot be any “self-existence” without the possibility of communicating and receiving it, Staniloae claims. Thus, God communicates existence and receives it within himself and completes in this way his personhood, which is characterized by being both self-existence and communion. The persons of the Trinity are interior to each other but are not confused; they are continuously “within a movement and communion of being and love. The total interpersonal communion intensifies the personal character of God to the highest degree.”³⁰⁹ Without communion there can be no person. Staniloae writes: “Only in the Trinity, which is a unity of distinct persons, is the character of being person fully assured.”³¹⁰

Only a person, writes Staniloae, can be “of itself” – no impersonal essence can; because an impersonal essence is always enslaved by a system of references. Therefore the supreme super-existent essence can only be personal. Only because the divine super-essence subsists as supreme Personal reality it can be “of itself”, since this implies also its existence “for

³⁰⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 344.

³⁰⁷ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 39 (quote); *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 80.

³⁰⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 130-132.

³⁰⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 134.

³¹⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 70.

itself”.³¹¹ Existing “for itself” the personal super-essence, in contrast to an essence subsisting as object, is free and transcendent in relation to any system of references. A person does not need to transmit the actions of others and of nature itself, but is free to shape her or his own life. Thus, only a person can exist for itself and is super-essential *par excellence*; and only the divine persons exist for themselves in a complete way.³¹²

All this has consequences for Staniloae’s definition of God’s essence. For him, “the person is nothing other than the mode of real subsistence that belongs to a nature. [...] Being does not exist really except in a hypostasis, or – in the case of spiritual being – in the conscious subject.” Thus, *God’s essence is “a community of subjects who are fully transparent.”*³¹³

Furthermore, Staniloae defines God’s essence as the “loving community” of the divine Persons,³¹⁴ as their “perfect love”, as their “unity and relation”,³¹⁵ or, quoting Pavel Florensky, as “a substantial relation”, which means the divine persons as “a relation which appears as essence”.³¹⁶ Florensky, thus, follows Dionysios, writes Staniloae, “who defines the divine being as goodness, hence as relationship.”³¹⁷ Yet, God’s “essence subsists *only* in the persons found in community.”³¹⁸ Of course, Staniloae also acknowledges that we may never

³¹¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 135.

³¹² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 135-136.

³¹³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 256 (my emphasis). Initially, there might seem to be a resemblance between Staniloae and John Zizioulas, here. However, Zizioulas criticizes Staniloae for indicating “something positive about the *how* or the *content* of the intra-Trinitarian relations on which the Cappadocians *constantly* and *persistently* refused to speculate” (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 195 n44 [Zizioulas emphasis]). Furthermore, Zizioulas claims that the Cappadocians as well as Greek patristic thought in general, in contrast to Staniloae, perceive of “subjectivity” and “consciousness” as “something common and identical to all three of the divine Persons (135 n63). I am not sure, though, if Zizioulas critique is relevant, because it seems to me that for Staniloae, God’s personal consciousness is both personal and common, since the three subjects of God are said to be “perfectly interior to one another” (Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 260). “The three subjects do not detach themselves from one another, each from the consciousness of the others [...] Each experiences the modes in which the others live the divine being, yet not as his own but as theirs” (261).

Perhaps Zizioulas would agree that the Father, to the very least, is *conscious in some sense* that he is not the Son and Spirit, and that the Son is *conscious* that he is not the Father and Spirit, etc. Or, does he really mean that God in his one common consciousness is conscious that he, in fact, is not only one, but three persons – Father, Son and Spirit? But then his point of the divine Personhood as freedom and love, and also the Father as cause, would be rather inconceivable. For how could the Father cause the Son and the Spirit in freedom and love if he had no consciousness about his otherness towards them, apart from the common single consciousness which he shares with the other divine persons? But, perhaps Zizioulas only denies the divine Persons “consciousness in the modern sense”, that is, anthropomorphic consciousness “in the psychological sense” (*Communion and Otherness*, 173, 171; cf. 176-177)? But if this is the case, then I would certainly wonder why he criticizes Staniloae in the first place. Would he really imagine that Staniloae thinks of God’s personal consciousness in terms of psychology?

³¹⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 70.

³¹⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 258.

³¹⁶ Florensky, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 258 (quoted from *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*).

³¹⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 279 n23.

³¹⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 72 (my emphasis); cf. 129.

know what this essence really is, since it transcends all our concepts and possibilities of understanding.³¹⁹

In order to be in full communion with another person, Staniloae affirms, one has to make oneself transparent as pure subject. The more we are and appear as subjects to each other, the more our relations will be marked by free and intimate communion and communication, and by a clearer “interiority and conscious reciprocal compenetration”.³²⁰ This brings about, what Staniloae calls, a greater “intersubjectivity”. In the case of the divine subjects who are fully transparent and pure, the inter-subjectivity is complete.³²¹ In their “eternal and perfect community of love” the divine subjects actually “communicate their own being to each other, without they themselves blending together.”³²²

Staniloae conceives of this perfect communication as “eternal acts” in which the divine Persons reciprocally affirm one another in existence through perfect love.³²³ But since they are within the very same integral movement of going out totally towards each other, they can be conceived as “unmoved”. It is this “stable”, eternal, perfect and completely realized reciprocal love that makes possible the common movement of the divine Persons towards personal creatures.³²⁴

Salvation as personal communion

According to Staniloae, God desires to reach union with the created persons, not only through his own ecstasy towards them, but also through their free personal ecstasy towards him. But as long as their love is inadequate and their will does not harmonize with his will, the distance between them and him remains.³²⁵

The love God communicates to his creatures is the very love by which the divine Persons love each other. From the perfect love that each divine Person has for the other two, each of them communicates his love to humans, too.³²⁶ This love from God is a continual offer to us, whereas our love is nothing but a response to God’s love and, hence, would not even be possible “if this offer did not exist – an offer which is simultaneously a power given

³¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 70, 126, 129, 141, 211, 258; *Orthodox Spirituality*, 249-251.

³²⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 260-261.

³²¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 261.

³²² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 53.

³²³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 257.

³²⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 240-241.

³²⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 241.

³²⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 252-253.

to man to respond to God.”³²⁷ The love by which we move towards God is the love by which he moves us towards himself.³²⁸

Referring to Dionysios, Staniloae affirms that while God brings creation into existence he is also attracted to it, “or rather the God who has not gone out of himself is attracted by his presence which has gone out of himself and which is found in creatures.”³²⁹ The divine yearning, or *eros*, is a unifying force of love, which conveys an ecstasy that makes the lover belong to the beloved rather than to her- or himself. Thus, as the lover God belongs to us – in a certain sense – rather than to himself, but he also awakens our *eros* towards him, which makes us belong to him rather than to ourselves.³³⁰

Love is realized, says Staniloae, when two persons meet, fully affirming each other as subjects, without reducing the other as object, revealing themselves to the maximum as subjects, giving themselves to the other in complete freedom.³³¹

You can't know your neighbor in a personal way only on your own initiative, or by an aggressive expedition. In order to know him he must reveal himself, on his own initiative; he does this in proportion to the lack of your aggression to know him. How much more so with God, the Supreme Person and one who isn't clothed in a visible body; man can't know Him, unless He reveals himself.³³²

To Staniloae, love entails mutual elevation, knowledge and freedom. The greater the love is between two persons, the more they will reveal themselves to each other. But lack of attention, or attempts to reduce the other as object, will inevitably smother their loving relation.³³³ In fact, there is a strong tendency in humans to relapse to the reduction of the other as object. “Only holy ‘fear’ of supreme Person” writes Staniloae, “helps me continuously rekindle my experience of the other as subject and as one toward whom I have an unlimited responsibility”. Without this fear we continuously relapse to neglect the other, and seek to take advantage of her or him.³³⁴

For Staniloae, the divine love towards creatures is a *movement* of God. This divine movement of love towards created persons implies as its source an *eternal movement* of love

³²⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 156.

³²⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 242.

³²⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 239.

³³⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 239. On this reciprocal ecstatic love at a general human level, see 242.

³³¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 315.

³³² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 38.

³³³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 316.

³³⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 2, 198-199 (quote 199).

within God, which, in turn, implies a community of persons within God who manifest this love.³³⁵ Our salvation is completely dependent on this personal divine love. Staniloae writes that “the only way” the Trinity can deify human persons

is by really uniting them with itself by love, enabling them to experience in a real way its love. Only so are freedom and love manifested in existence, without which everything would seem without any purpose whatsoever.³³⁶

Furthermore, Staniloae writes that

there is no salvation for the human person apart from communication with supreme Person. Apart from this communication, the power to strengthen oneself spiritually is nowhere to be found, nor the power to remain eternally as persons without being reduced to the level of nature, or virtually to that level. [... Moreover,] the salvation of man is assured as an eternal, happy existence only if his relation with the supreme Personal reality is so close that the powers and attributes of God will be stamped indelibly upon him through what is called deification. For this deification makes man, together with God, a bearer of the divine attributes and powers that completely overcome that tendency which the human body has towards corruption.³³⁷

According to Staniloae, the Church fathers inadequately laid greater emphasis on the natural aspect of deification than on the personal. This imbalance is due to the fact, says Staniloae, that the ideas of person and inter-personal communion were not very well developed in the patristic era. For Staniloae, these two aspects belong together as a single whole,³³⁸ as is evident from the quote above.

The essence/energies distinction

In translating the Greek term *energeiai* Staniloae prefers “operations” (Romanian: *lucrare*), even though he also uses “energies”. In his *Dogmatics*, the chapter on the essence/energies

³³⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 240.

³³⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 52.

³³⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 65.

³³⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 72-73. Apropos his personalism, both Louth and Ware acknowledges that Staniloae deepens the patristic insights by utilizing modern thought (Louth, “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology”, 65; Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xvii).

distinction is even named “The *Being* of God and His Uncreated *Operations*”.³³⁹ However, this choice of translation does not seem to be some kind of statement. Rather, he uses operations and energies as interchangeable words or synonyms.³⁴⁰ In his preference for translating *ousia* with “being” rather than “essence” or “substance”, Staniloae simply follows the common practice in Romania.³⁴¹

Essential to Staniloae’s understanding of the essence/energies distinction is his notion of the two different movements of God, namely, (1) the inner-trinitarian movement and (2) the movement towards creation.

(1) The inner-trinitarian movement is a movement of love in which the divine Persons give themselves to each other totally. They even communicate their own very being (i.e. essence) to each other, without blending together.³⁴² “In a certain sense” even humans in loving relationship can be said to communicate their “whole self” or “whole being”.³⁴³ But because of their perfect love the divine Persons communicate their very being to each other in a manner beyond our grasp:

On the highest, divine level, the difference between nature and energy is surpassed in a way incomprehensible to us. The divine nature itself is energy, without ceasing to be an undepletable nature; the nature itself is communicating energy. But it is so because it is of the Supreme Persons. The Persons communicate their nature as an energy. *Everything is an energy which is communicated from one person to another.* Their love is perfect; they radiate their *whole nature* from one to the other.³⁴⁴

Thus, Staniloae affirms an identity between nature and energy in God. Yet, such an identity exists only within God. Everything communicated from a person to a person is an energy, but only within God is the personal essence *totally* communicated. In no other case is any personal essence totally communicated – including God’s communication towards

³³⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, Ch. 7, 125-139 (my emphasis).

³⁴⁰ Cf. Agachi, *Neo-Palamite Synthesis*, 34. Perhaps Staniloae simply likes the variety of language, as Agachi proposes (34). And perhaps his preference for “operations” is an attempt to make his theology more accessible to laypersons, since this is a great concern of his (cf. e.g. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, 133). Apparently, he uses colloquial language even in major theological works – rendered in English translations by e.g. “can’t”, “doesn’t”, etc. (cf. Kloos; Newville, “Translators’ note”, in: *Orthodox Spirituality*, below the table of contents).

³⁴¹ Lucian Turcescu, “Editor’s note”, in: Rogobete, “Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian Participation?”, 194 n107.

³⁴² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 53.

³⁴³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 310.

³⁴⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 53 (my emphasis).

creation. Therefore, the essence of God is clearly *not identical* with what he communicates of himself towards creation – that is, his operations.³⁴⁵

The identity between essence and energy within God fits well with Staniloae’s definition of God’s essence. As we have seen,³⁴⁶ Staniloae conceives of God’s essence as the loving community of the divine persons, in which the persons goes out of themselves towards the other in an eternal movement of love, which is total, reciprocal and integral to the three, and therefore unmoving and stable. He affirms, on the one hand, that the essence is perfect love, loving community and substantial relation, and on the other, that it only subsists, and is only really given, in the divine Persons. Thus, God’s essence is the divine Persons in perfect communion. Yet, we must not forget that we, according to Staniloae, may never really know what the divine essence is.

(2) God’s movement towards creation is, for Staniloae, identical to his uncreated energies or operations. So far as I can discern, the word “energies” always refers to God’s operations *in relation to creation*. Yet, as we have seen, he occasionally uses the singular form, “energy”, as well as the words “movement” and “acts” (in the plural), to designate the eternal inter-trinitarian nature.³⁴⁷ In contrast to Lossky, Staniloae has actually *no* conception of an eternal energy (or energies) distinct from God’s essence. To him, the essence/energies distinction is, rather, a successful “synthesis of the two concepts: the changelessness of God, and his life and activity *in regard to creation*.”³⁴⁸

Staniloae affirms that this “synthesis found its most pregnant formulation in the Palamite doctrine of the uncreated energies which do change although they come forth from the essence of God which remains unchanged.”³⁴⁹ Yet, as we have seen,³⁵⁰ he hardly uses Palamas himself when explicating this doctrine.

However, to Staniloae, this doctrine manages to take

seriously the fact that God has a personal character and as such can, like every person, live on more than one plane, or, better, on two principal planes: *the plane of existence in oneself and the plane of activity for the other*. A mother, for example, can play with her child, bringing herself down to his level, yet at the same time she preserves her mature

³⁴⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 136. However, Staniloae claims that since the acts of *non-personal objects* are exhaustive the essence and energies are identical in them too.

³⁴⁶ Above, subch. “God is supreme Person”.

³⁴⁷ Above, subch. “God is supreme Person”. However, all instances of “energy” in this sense is, so far as I can tell, limited to one page: Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 53.

³⁴⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 150 (my emphasis).

³⁴⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 150.

³⁵⁰ Above 63.

consciousness as mother. God in himself, who is above time, meets with the creatures of time through his energies.³⁵¹

Thus, for Staniloae, the essence/energies distinction really is the distinction between “existence in oneself” and “activity for the other”. In the case of God, his position is most revealingly transcribed, I think, as the distinction between *God as he is in and for himself* and *God as he is in and for creation*.³⁵²

In order to bring himself down to our creaturely level, Staniloae affirms, “God himself *changes for our sake* in his operations, remaining simple as the source of these operations and being wholly present in each one of them.”³⁵³ Yet, even our knowledge of these operations is limited. “The names which we give God refer to the divine energies which descend to us,”³⁵⁴ but “our names, borrowed from the effects of the divine energies in the world, don’t adequately touch even these energies” – “the human mind [only] expresses as much as it can.”³⁵⁵

Apparently, God’s essence and energies are not identical for Staniloae, but still, they are intimately connected: From the very love each divine person has for the other two, each of them communicates his love to humans.³⁵⁶ Thus, “the interior love of the Trinity can be perceived in the work it directs *ad extra*.”³⁵⁷ Consequently, through his energies, “God makes something of his being evident to us”.³⁵⁸

Thus, since Staniloae affirms that God communicates his inter-trinitarian love to us, and that this inner-trinitarian love is actually identical to his essence, it should follow, it seems to me, that in his communication towards creation God communicates his very essence – though not in its totality but changed for our sake, as Staniloae himself affirms (above), and adapted to our creaturely level. Yet, as God’s essence is changed for our sake and adapted to our creaturely level, it is not called essence anymore – which is perfectly consequential to the

³⁵¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 150 (my emphasis).

³⁵² Cf. Rogobete who spells out the essence/energies distinction in Staniloae as the distinction between “being-in-itself” and “being-in-relation [to the world]” (“Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian Participation?”, 199).

³⁵³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 126 (my emphasis). Cf. Tollefsen, who thinks that the external activities, in Greek patristic thought, “are certain ways in which the essence moves in a modified sense in order to accomplish something externally” (*Activity and Participation*, 91; see “Appendix” below).

³⁵⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 249.

³⁵⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 250.

³⁵⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 252-253.

³⁵⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 68.

³⁵⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 128. The context is about God’s attributes *in motion*, and since this, for Staniloae, is identical to God’s energies (125), it is legitimate to write “through his energies”, as I have done, even though the original quote has “[t]hrough his attributes”.

conventional definition of God's essence – but energies or operations. Since God's essence according to conventional definition is the “what” of God, God's definition or whatever is constitutive of God,³⁵⁹ his communication on our creaturely level may clearly not be equated with this concept.

From all this, it is not difficult to understand Staniloae's affirmation that God's operations “are united in the unique being of the three hypostases” and that the distinctions among them only “appear when the divine being has reference to ourselves”.³⁶⁰ In the divine being they are ultimately identical to the essence – his unmoving, total, inter-trinitarian communion of love.

It is neither difficult to see what Staniloae means when he writes that the

eternal communion after which we yearn has its *origin and fulfillment in the one eternal co-essentiality* of the divine persons of the Trinity. [... C]ertainly the communion between God and those who believe is assured by their participation, through grace, in the divine nature or in the energies irradiating from the common nature of the three divine persons, which is to say, from their loving community.³⁶¹

According to Staniloae, God offers to humans “all that he has, with the exception of the fact that he cannot make them to be as he himself is, that is, uncreated and sources of existence.”³⁶² Through the uncreated energies we may actually participate “in the fullness of divine life”.³⁶³

As I stated before, Staniloae's assessment of the essence/energies distinction is best expressed as the distinction between *God as he is in and for himself* and *God as he is in and for creation*. Yet if this interpretation is right, one may wonder why he uses the word “energies”, or even “operations”, when he really means God himself – that is, the Father, Son and Spirit in loving community – as he is in and for creation. Neither “energies” nor “operations” are, as far as I am concerned, generally thought of as one's total personal reality in so far as one communicates oneself, *on the level of the receiver*, towards the other.³⁶⁴ On

³⁵⁹ Above 29.

³⁶⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 144.

³⁶¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 70 (my emphasis).

³⁶² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 216.

³⁶³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 188.

³⁶⁴ Cf. *American Heritage Dictionary* (referred to by the pro-Palamite Bradshaw [“Concept of the Divine Energies”, 33-34]), which renders energies as e.g. “The capacity for work or vigorous activity”; “Exertion of vigor or power”; “Vitality and intensity of expression”; “A nonphysical force or quality perceived as inhering in a particular place, person, or situation” (<https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=energies> [last accessed, 2017-12-07]).

the contrary, these concepts do not seem to imply, by themselves, the radical personal presence which is central to Staniloae's understanding. Of course, he is just using traditional Orthodox language; but given his concern to be comprehensible to laypersons, it might have been more effective to alter this language.

Ontological or epistemological?

After uncovering Staniloae's opinion about the essence/energies distinction, it seems rather odd to ask whether it is best expressed by the term ontological or epistemological. To me, both of these labels sit really ill with his opinion.

As we have seen, the energies are God's personal inner-trinitarian love – that is, his essence – yet directed towards creation and, thus, changed in order to meet us at our own creaturely level. Therefore, I can not see how one could possibly speak of an ontological distinction between God's essence and energies in Staniloae. However, since God in his operations is changed to meet us at our creaturely level, it would also be rather odd to claim that the distinction is only epistemological.

Thus, I am refuting Romanian scholar Emil Bartos who affirms that this distinction is ontological “for both Maximus and Staniloae”.³⁶⁵ Yet, whereas Bartos quotes Maximus in support of his opinion, he fails to mention that Staniloae actually has utilized the very same quote, which goes: “God infinitely transcends all things which participate or are participated.”³⁶⁶ In fact, Bartos does not provide any evidence from the writings of Staniloae himself in this respect, but just seems to assume that Staniloae is quite in line with some presumed mainstream of 20th century Orthodoxy.³⁶⁷

For Bartos the concepts “real” and “ontological” are apparently interchangeable,³⁶⁸ just as with the supervisor of his doctoral thesis, Kallistos Ware.³⁶⁹ However, I have not been able to detect one single instance where Staniloae writes that the essence/energies distinction is either “real” or “ontological”, and Bartos does not provide any evidence to the contrary.

Bartos seems to make the argument that since Staniloae affirms that *deification* is “real”, which according to Bartos means “ontological”, he must also affirm a “real distinction” –

³⁶⁵ Bartos, *Deification*, 66.

³⁶⁶ Maximus, in: Bartos, *Deification*, 66 (orig. *Capita gnostica* 1.49); cf. Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 143. More on this quote in Staniloae in next subch.

³⁶⁷ This is a general problem with his book, which makes it very difficult to use for scholarly purposes. It continually blurs Staniloae's opinions with those of his contemporary Orthodox colleagues.

³⁶⁸ Bartos, *Deification*, 72.

³⁶⁹ Bartos' book is the fruit of this doctoral thesis (*Deification*, xi).

meaning, for Bartos, an “ontological distinction” – between God’s energies and essence.³⁷⁰ But I find this argument unconvincing; firstly, because I do not think that it is plausible to equate “real” with “ontological”,³⁷¹ and secondly, there is simply nothing in the *real deification*, as it is explicated by Staniloae, that needs to imply an *ontological distinction* within God.

When Staniloae speaks of ontology it is *always about natures* (and not simply about what is real). Thus, he is in line with what Zizioulas refers to as the “widespread assumption”.³⁷² Consequently, for Staniloae, our relationship with God is “ontological” through God’s power in *our nature* and, since the incarnation, through *the human nature* of Christ.³⁷³ Yet, he affirms that the ontological distinction between Creator and creature will remain infinitely, no matter how far deification is realized.³⁷⁴ We will never become Gods ontologically, that is, Gods *by nature*, but only gods by grace;³⁷⁵ we will never “arrive at knowing God as He knows Himself.”³⁷⁶ Thus, our ontological relationship with God is ontological only so far as *our human nature* receives God’s power and is united to the Son.

Moreover, in the context of inter-human communication, Staniloae explicitly denies that the going out of oneself towards the other may be thought of as “ontological”. This outward movement means rather that one is not enclosed in self-contemplation, but directed through love towards the other.³⁷⁷ Since Staniloae himself frequently draws parallels between human and divine personhood,³⁷⁸ we may presume that this, for him, would mean that God’s going out in love towards creation (i.e. his energies) may not be labelled ontological either, even if it affects the very nature of the creatures.

The divine attributes

In the first volume of the English translation of Staniloae’s *Dogmatics* more than one hundred pages are dedicated to the attributes of God.³⁷⁹ These attributes are directly related to our

³⁷⁰ Bartos, *Deification*, 72; cf. 66.

³⁷¹ Which I have already argued against Ware, above 55-56.

³⁷² Above, 56 (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 124-125 [quote 124]).

³⁷³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 37, 57.

³⁷⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 357, 360.

³⁷⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 37.

³⁷⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 357.

³⁷⁷ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 335.

³⁷⁸ This is also emphasized by Berger (“Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 133-134).

³⁷⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, Ch. 8-9, 141-244.

topic since God's operations, in fact, "are nothing other than the attributes of God in motion – or God himself, the simple One, in a motion" towards creation.³⁸⁰

However, Staniloae's exposition of God's attributes may initially appear to be confusing, since it, at times, seems to contradict the general thrust of his own opinion. This happens when he, though rarely so, seems to presuppose some kind of platonic realism – by which I mean a realist position concerning certain perfections in which humans may participate in order to ascend towards the divine. Yet, in general he affirms that God's attributes rather are rational ways to understand God, and that they, in fact, are united in the inexhaustible simplicity of God's essence.

The strongest example of platonic realism in Staniloae that I have found concerns a quote of Maximos (referred to with Bartos in the subch. above) which reads: "God is infinitely beyond all *things that exist*, both those things which participate and *those things in which they participate*."³⁸¹ With Maximos, Staniloae affirms that we participate in God's attributes which are "around God" and are "not God", since God "is incomparably above even this." Furthermore, he affirms that God as supreme Person transcends his attributes in so far as he is their source and support.³⁸² Thus, God's attributes are said to be around God – and, even, *not God* – as *existing things*, but yet, they are not creation.

This is, however, the only instance of such a crude explication, as far as I can discern. But even though it seems to contradict what Staniloae affirms elsewhere, namely, that the attributes are "*within God himself [...] in a simple and incomprehensible way*",³⁸³ I think that it is possible to resolve this tension; and I will show how in the following.

For Staniloae, God's attributes are actually "the inexhaustible simplicity itself of the divine essence [which] is activated under the form of certain varied qualities through its acts" in its communication towards creation.³⁸⁴ They are the forms under which "we know, understand, and express him very *schematically and generally*" in "a *rational manner*," and through which "God communicates to us in *modes adapted to our condition* something of what he is in fact".³⁸⁵ Therefore, "God is not identical with any of those things we name as his qualities; he is identical neither with infinity, eternity, or simplicity, but transcends all of these."³⁸⁶ As "the supreme personal existence" God "is beyond all determination" and,

³⁸⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 125.

³⁸¹ Maximos, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 143 (my emphasis); orig. *Capita gnostica* 1.49.

³⁸² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 143.

³⁸³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 125 (my emphasis).

³⁸⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 127.

³⁸⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 127 (my emphasis).

³⁸⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 102.

consequently, we only grasp him as a number of attributes “inasmuch as he has deigned to enter into relationship with us.”³⁸⁷ Thus, since God’s attributes simply are the determinations which enable us to grasp him rationally and schematically, and only reflect something of what he is in fact, it is perfectly reasonable, I think, to say – as Staniloae and Maximos do – that God himself is *infinitely beyond* his attributes which are even *not God*.

Yet, there is a further difficulty with Maximos’ quote (above): The attributes are said to be “things that exist” or simply “things” – as in Bartos’ rendering;³⁸⁸ or even “beings”, as Maximos scholar Tollefsen renders it.³⁸⁹ This is a difficulty because it might seem to endow the attributes with some kind of existence “in their own right” – something which Staniloae explicitly denies.³⁹⁰

However, according to Tollefsen, the term “beings” does not, for Maximos, mean that the attributes are some “kind of reality of their own, i.e. as some kind of *beings* established by God.” Even though they “are similar in kind” to the “Platonic Ideas”, “it is important to remember that for a Christian thinker like Maximos such Ideas could not exist in separation from God.”³⁹¹ To Maximos “all that is categorized by the term being, is a work of God, and belongs to the class of what is transcended by the Godhead.”³⁹² One reason for calling the attributes “beings”, Tollefsen affirms, is because they designate God’s permanent being-giving presence in creation.³⁹³ For Maximos, this being-giving is God’s primary activity towards creation – it embraces all the other activities.³⁹⁴ The different attributes, says Tollefsen, are identified by the “names we give to God’s being-giving, life-giving, immortality-giving, [etc. ...], and infinity-making activities.”³⁹⁵

This understanding of Maximos goes well together with Staniloae (for whom Maximos was the most favoured Church father).³⁹⁶ The attributes – these “things that exist” – do not exist in their own right but *emerge as such only in relation to creation*. Within God himself they are simply one.

The focal point of Staniloae’s theology remains his personalism. As we have seen, this personalism contends that the attributes and characteristics of another person are, in fact,

³⁸⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 150.

³⁸⁸ Above, 74 (Bartos, *Deification*, 66).

³⁸⁹ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 164.

³⁹⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 132.

³⁹¹ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 162 (Tollefsen’s emphasis); cf. *Activity and Participation*, 128, 131.

³⁹² Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 128.

³⁹³ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 131.

³⁹⁴ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 162-164.

³⁹⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 127.

³⁹⁶ Ware, “Foreword”, in: Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, xiii; Louth, “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology”, 58; Berger, “Contemporary Synthesis of Maximus”, 404; De Mey, “Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology”, 13.

inadequate expressions, which only emerge *when love ceases*. In love one does not consider the other's attributes but, rather, encounters the other *as a whole*.³⁹⁷

Thus, the determination of God's attributes is possible only at a distance. It is a rational endeavour rather than a loving union. In our union with God the attributes appear, rather, as *dynamic, immensely rich of nuances* and, therefore, *unnameable in themselves* – as they are *one in the inexhaustible simplicity* of his essence.³⁹⁸

The Son, the Spirit and the Church

As the Son took a human nature, Staniloae affirms, God entered into “an ontological relationship with us, which means that no matter how we ascend to God we aren't alone, but with Him and in Him.”³⁹⁹ In Christ the union between God and human has reached its highest stage, and the plan of salvation and deification of creation is fulfilled.⁴⁰⁰ Quoting Maximos, Staniloae writes: “In Christ, man ‘in his entirety has [...] become everything that God is, apart from identity of nature.’ And in the power of Christ, men too can bring about this work of unification.”⁴⁰¹

The mission of Christ is to recapitulate us in himself, Staniloae affirms, “and thus bring all into eternal communion with God in Trinity.” In a circular movement the Son “descends from the Holy Trinity in order to return [...] not only as divine person, but also as human person, having united to himself all of humanity that desires this.”⁴⁰² “In Christ human nature is deified not only through the uncreated energies but also through the divine hypostasis who bears it and is manifested through it.” Through his human nature the divine Son radiates the energies from the inside, since he belongs to that nature as well as to the divine nature.⁴⁰³

Through Christ's humanity, the Father's love for his Son – “in the form of the Holy Spirit” – reaches us too.⁴⁰⁴ “By the incarnate Son the Holy Spirit radiates within humanity and the world, as the love of God for us and of ours for God.”⁴⁰⁵ Thus the inter-trinitarian life and

³⁹⁷ Above, 64-65 (Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 344).

³⁹⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 126-128.

³⁹⁹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 57 (cf. above, 75).

⁴⁰⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 37.

⁴⁰¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 147 (orig. *The Ambigua*, PG 91.1308B).

⁴⁰² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 76.

⁴⁰³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 181.

⁴⁰⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 54. Apparently, Staniloae affirms the Augustinian/Palamite teaching that the Holy Spirit is the love, or the “hypostasized communication”, between the Father and the Son (53; cf. Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 217). On Palamas' dependence on Augustine in this matter, see e.g. Flogaus, “Inspiration – Exploitation – Distortion”, 77; Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 36-37).

⁴⁰⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 54.

love is brought into creation by the Spirit who “raises creation to the level of inter-Trinitarian love and deification.”⁴⁰⁶ Staniloae writes:

Through love the Holy Spirit unites us with God and among ourselves and becomes the bearer of love from God to us and from us to God and one another, just as God’s incarnate Son is too. The Spirit moves us from within through his love which he has from the Father and brings to us the love of the Father and the love between himself and the Father, while at the same time implanting in us too his own love for the Father and for all men.⁴⁰⁷

However, deification also implies our free consent, Staniloae affirms. If we actualize our union with God through faith and liberation from passions, we may be united with every believer and may “simultaneously hold the whole of space caught within the range of the divine-human energies of Christ which radiate through us.”⁴⁰⁸ Thus, the distance between God and creation may be overcome. Yet, because of our freedom to refuse God, Christ has not yet been able to gather in himself the whole of creation. God awaits our free response as he is present through Christ “alongside everyone, *not only with his being, but also with his energy*, ready to enter into action.”⁴⁰⁹

At the resurrection the deification of Christ’s humanity is complete, Staniloae affirms, and since Pentecost also “those who believe in Christ are sensible to the full power of the Spirit shining forth from Christ.”⁴¹⁰ Thus, through Pentecost the effect of revelation is beginning to be applied to believers, and they are led by the Son and the Spirit towards their own resurrection and bodily ascension. In Christ’s resurrection his body was made transparent through the Spirit, and in the final resurrection, not only will our bodies become fully transparent through the Holy Spirit in perfect union with Christ, but “that same condition will be brought about for the whole of creation.”⁴¹¹

Revelation is completed with Christ, Staniloae affirms. Yet, by his power and through the Holy Spirit, it continues to be active in and through the Church – to the benefit of the whole creation. Even though revelation does not continue to be completed in the sense of

⁴⁰⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 55.

⁴⁰⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 243.

⁴⁰⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 182.

⁴⁰⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 181-183, quote 183 (my emphasis).

⁴¹⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 33.

⁴¹¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 34.

addition of new parts,⁴¹² it is continuously completed in the Church as it crystallizes as a union between believers and Christ. “Subsequently, the Church remains the milieu where revelation finds its application until the end of the world, and whence comes the gift of Christ’s saving power through the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹³

Rationality and three steps of apophaticism

In Staniloae’s epistemology the influence of Palamas is apparent.⁴¹⁴ Epistemology and the vision of the divine light are the two fields, I would contend, where Staniloae appreciates Palamas’ contribution the most. In his assessment, “Palamas has given a final precision to the patristic tradition regarding the knowledge of God.”⁴¹⁵ Yet, as usual, Staniloae draws on several sources, and his original personalist stamp is significant.

According to Staniloae, the dogmas of the Church “affirm the *complete rationality* of existence” in so far as they affirm the eternal meaning of existence.⁴¹⁶ To him, a meaningless world would be irrational.⁴¹⁷ “The entire universe bears the stamp of a *personal rationality* intended for the eternal existence of human persons”; and the rationality and meaning of the universe can only be acquired through its relationship with the supreme rational Person “who makes it serve an eternal dialogue of love with other persons.”⁴¹⁸

For Staniloae, “the world as object is only the means for a dialogue of loving thoughts and works between supreme rational Person and rational human persons”.⁴¹⁹ Consequently, the rationality of person is infinitely superior to the rationality of nature. For whereas nature develops without any consciousness of its purpose, totally integrated within its system of involuntary references, the person has a possibility of freedom in relation to the system of references and is capable of making use of the rationality of nature, conscious of her or his own proper development and continuous experience.⁴²⁰

Even in the highest level of knowledge of God, Staniloae affirms, reason is involved and exercised to the maximum of its powers. Since the supreme knowledge of God is not irrational but supra-rational, our limited rational powers are surpassed by a plus and not a

⁴¹² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 38.

⁴¹³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 56-57 (quote 57).

⁴¹⁴ Yet, references to Palamas are still quite few in his *Dogmatics*. However, in *Orthodox Spirituality*, they are more frequent.

⁴¹⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 114.

⁴¹⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 10 (my emphasis).

⁴¹⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 98.

⁴¹⁸ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 11 (my emphasis).

⁴¹⁹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 11.

⁴²⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 10-11, 131.

minus. It is this abundance of meanings that make us realize that their source is not only in our reason but also in a super-reason, “which lifts up our reason beyond its powers, without annulling it.”⁴²¹ Referring to Palamas, Staniloae writes that “the experience on the higher steps isn’t called knowledge because of the absence of knowledge, but because of its superabundance.”⁴²²

At the same time, Staniloae is perfectly clear that the knowledge of God is *not* achieved by discursive and deductive reasoning, because this would presuppose categories, definitions and distinctions which put limits on the object of knowledge. In this sense, rational thinking and reason is not applicable to divinity, but only to the natural world. On the contrary, the divine is known through a “faster intuition”, a kind of knowledge “in the spirit” supported by the grace of the Holy Spirit – a contemplation in which, quoting Maurice Blondel, “the discursive powers no longer keep looking for answers, but have found their rest.”⁴²³

However, Staniloae claims, we may by no means renounce rational, or cataphatic, knowledge.⁴²⁴ In cataphatic knowledge, he generally includes both the affirmations and negations of God. Yet, as we will see, he occasionally refers the negations to apophaticism (this seems to be confusing to some interpreters)⁴²⁵.

Staniloae explicitly renounces “the too rigid distinction between the intellectual and the apophatic knowledge of God.”⁴²⁶ He emphasizes that God transcends all affirmations *in his supreme positivity* – himself being “the most positive reality.” Furthermore, it is a positive fact that believers may experience God sensibly and consciously, in awareness of his incomprehensibility.⁴²⁷

Moreover, Staniloae emphasizes that “[n]egative theology doesn’t justify a laziness of the spirit, an abdication of reason, but requires a continual raising of the scaffolding of reason”.⁴²⁸ Therefore, “we don’t think that the disrespect with which some Orthodox theologians [no names mentioned] speak about positive theology is right.”⁴²⁹ Without affirmations about God religious life itself would be endangered since we could not even say

⁴²¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 208.

⁴²² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 236.

⁴²³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 206-207 (quotes, 206, 207, 207 [orig. in: Blondel, *L’Action*, vol. 1, 91-92]).

⁴²⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 95.

⁴²⁵ E.g. Rogobete, “Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian Participation?”, 189; Bartos, *Deification*, 52 n65.

⁴²⁶ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

⁴²⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

⁴²⁸ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 246.

⁴²⁹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 247.

that God is. God has actually revealed himself in both Scripture and the world, and since “they tell us something positive about Him, it is clear that positive theology has its rights.”⁴³⁰

However, Staniloae acknowledges that apophatic knowledge is superior to, and completes, cataphatic knowledge (both affirmative and negative); yet he affirms that when we want to express our apophatic knowledge we have to resort to the terms of rational knowledge. Thus, when the Greek fathers speak of God, they frequently pass from the one mode of knowledge to the other.⁴³¹

For Staniloae, God is known as person in both apophatic and cataphatic knowledge, although our experience of God as person is more clear, profound and pressing in the apophatic knowledge.⁴³² Through cataphatic knowledge we know God only as he creates and sustains the world, whereas we through apophatic knowledge “gain a kind of direct experience of his mystical presence”.⁴³³

In his book *Orthodox Spirituality*, Staniloae distinguishes between three steps of apophaticism. His main source for structuring apophaticism in this way seems to be Palamas.⁴³⁴ It is in this scheme that negative knowledge of God is included in the concept of apophaticism, even though it is still regarded as an intellectual, or rational, endeavour. However, negative knowledge is not only rational, he points out, because there is an intuitive element in it, which acknowledges that reason is insufficient for describing God.⁴³⁵

The three steps of apophaticism, according to Staniloae, are “negative theology, apophaticism at the height of prayer, and the apophaticism of the vision of the divine light.”⁴³⁶

The first step, “negative theology”, concerns knowledge of God through negations of affirmations based on his working presence in the world. In negative theology, we perceive God’s energies in creation, aware that they transcend our limited reason by far.⁴³⁷

The second step, “pure prayer”,⁴³⁸ is beyond any mental operation, beyond concepts and our apophatic sense about them. It is a state of silence with almost no positive elements of knowledge.⁴³⁹ This apophaticism is reached through unceasing prayer and purification from the passions. The mind has expelled any thought, even the innocent ones; it has no object

⁴³⁰ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 247.

⁴³¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 95-96; cf. *Orthodox Spirituality*, 347.

⁴³² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 97.

⁴³³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 95.

⁴³⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 237-244; esp. 238-239.

⁴³⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 245.

⁴³⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 237.

⁴³⁷ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 245-247.

⁴³⁸ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 255.

⁴³⁹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 237-238.

apart from the awareness of Jesus' presence, and only asks for God's mercy.⁴⁴⁰ In pure prayer one does not see God, but only feels his presence as the very source of one's existence. Seeing oneself directly, one sees God only indirectly.⁴⁴¹

In the third step, "the vision of the divine light", one sees God directly, but does no longer know oneself.⁴⁴² It is an overwhelming experience of divine presence and not only a direct feeling of the presence of God as the source of life. Unlike the previous steps it is not apophatic in the sense of void of knowledge. On the contrary, it is superabundant with supra-positive knowledge. Its apophaticism concerns rather the awareness that the divine light cannot be expressed in words or ever be exhausted through any experience, and that God's being remains totally inaccessible. In the third step the mind goes beyond the abyss – evident in the first two steps – which separates our knowledge from God and keeps us on the human side, to the divine side of knowledge. The human "becomes wholly light, [...] full of mystery, as a deified supernatural being". Yet, the growth in knowledge of the divine light remains an eternal progress in which one is continuously surprised about what has happened to oneself.⁴⁴³

Deification and divine light

In Staniloae's explication of deification, and especially of the vision of the divine light, Palamas is a major influence (among others, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysios, Maximos and Symeon the new Theologian). Still, however, Staniloae's characteristic original, personalist, contribution is continuously present as the determining factor of his reception of the fathers.

For Staniloae, deification is God's answer to our diligent pure prayer. In Palamas words: "The end of prayer is to be snatched away to God."⁴⁴⁴ God's love descends over us in ecstasy in an exclusively divine work. Our mind remains conscious that it participates in the work of the Holy Spirit, but "it no longer modifies the things received by its own operation, but it receives them as they are"; consequently, it gets to know a truer reality.⁴⁴⁵

In deification, Staniloae affirms, the operations of the human nature cease and are replaced by divine operations.⁴⁴⁶ We even become, together with God, the subjects of the

⁴⁴⁰ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 255-257.

⁴⁴¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 332.

⁴⁴² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 332.

⁴⁴³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 241-244 (quote, 244).

⁴⁴⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 304 (Palamas, orig. in: *Triads*, 2.3.35 [p. 65 in Meyendorff's ed.]).

⁴⁴⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 327.

⁴⁴⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 368.

divine operations, although God remains their only source.⁴⁴⁷ Practically and functionally we go beyond our limits,⁴⁴⁸ we see and know qualitatively as God.⁴⁴⁹ As we assimilate more and more to God's energies we pass in a sense from created to uncreated (although we always remain created according to our nature)⁴⁵⁰; yet we may never receive the energies in their totality. The deified person "is as God, yes even god, but not God."⁴⁵¹

In the supreme spiritualization, in which all bodily sensations are overwhelmed, Staniloae affirms, everything is filled with and appears as light. The physical world is not done away with, but has become the medium of the divine light. Even though the ontological distinctions remain they are no longer felt. This is what happens: "First, exterior things are overwhelmed; secondly, a great love is poured out through them, to everybody. Light radiates from everything". The one who sees this light, says Staniloae, has been united with it to such an extent "that he no longer is aware that he is separated and distinct from it."⁴⁵²

It is a light of love beyond nature, in which the very being of the one who sees it has been transformed. It is the state of culminating spiritualization, or of purity, of the overwhelming of bodily sensations, of the surpassing of the severe impulses of egotism; it is a state of supreme goodness, mildness, understanding, love; it is a feeling of spiritual delicacy and ease. This is the state of deification, of likeness to the divine Spirit.⁴⁵³

Staniloae acknowledges a *close relationship between love, knowledge and light*. When the fathers mention only two of these terms, the third is presupposed. Even on a creaturely level, light radiates from the beloved and fills the lover with light, which is evident from the smiles illuminating a loving couple. Through love the beloved's depths are opened and appear as loving and smiling, and the lovers are filled with unending joy which fills everything. Such an experience is characterized by love, experiential knowledge and light as the expression of joy. Thus, the "spiritual light is always the expression of the subjects that love each other [...] and is equivalent to their luminous or smiling radiation."⁴⁵⁴ It may also be described as the

⁴⁴⁷ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 329.

⁴⁴⁸ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 371.

⁴⁴⁹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 342.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 37, 371-373. Even though God offers to us all that he has, he cannot make us "to be as he himself is, that is, uncreated" (*Experience of God*, vol. 1, 216).

⁴⁵¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 373.

⁴⁵² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 360.

⁴⁵³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 361.

⁴⁵⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 330.

direct and non-discursive knowledge one receives when experiencing the other as a whole, without any reduction to concepts or attributes.⁴⁵⁵

Staniloae is perfectly clear that the divine light is not physical, but spiritual; it is not perceptible, but may be seen within – yet “only after the cessation of every natural activity of the human spirit”.⁴⁵⁶ But even though the divine light is spiritual it

is spread from the soul to the outside, to the face and the body of the one who has it inside. Everyone knows that a joy from the soul fills the face and eyes with a light which is distinct from the physical one produced by the radiation of the sun.⁴⁵⁷

So, just like inner joy is manifested in one’s face and body as a light, the divine light is manifested in the face and body of the one who has received it within. In this sense it may also be seen with the bodily eyes of anyone – just as in the case of Moses, whose face shown so much that those who saw him could not look steadily at this overwhelming light. However, the divine light *itself* is not seen by just anyone, but only by those who have it within themselves. Neither the senses nor the mind can see the divine light; its vision is only produced in one’s bodily eyes and mind by the Holy Spirit when one’s natural functions stops.⁴⁵⁸

In the divine light, Staniloae affirms, one experiences that one dwells in Christ, intimately and lovingly, but one experiences also the presence of the whole creation, so that one’s soul is filled with infinite love for all and for all things. The light is experienced as a wave of love without end which originates from Christ and draws the deified person into it in such a measure that it begins to overflow from this person as well.⁴⁵⁹ In order to gather the whole creation into itself the “Light” descended on earth at the “Incarnation”. It continued its work through the “Resurrection” and completes the work in each of us in so far as we are raised to its vision. “Strictly speaking, by our entrance into the light the work begun at creation is perfected.”⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 344-345.

⁴⁵⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 337-339 (quote 339).

⁴⁵⁷ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 339.

⁴⁵⁸ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 339-340.

⁴⁵⁹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 353.

⁴⁶⁰ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 352.

Appendix

The Greek fathers according to Torstein Tollefsen

After uncovering the opinions of Lossky, Ware and Staniloae, whose primary concern as regards the essence/energies distinction is to explicate, in a neo-patristic fashion, how Orthodoxy itself conceives of it, I have chosen to consult a more recent and more strictly academic interpretation by an Orthodox scholar of how the Greek fathers conceive of the relationship between God's essence and energies, namely, Torstein Tollefsen. A professor of philosophy, Tollefsen's main interest is the Greek fathers between 300 and 900.⁴⁶¹ He is renowned for his works on Maximos the Confessor.

Tollefsen interprets Palamas through the lens of the previous Greek fathers, primarily Maximos, and his goal is to show "that St Gregory Palamas was a traditional thinker and no innovator in the Byzantine tradition."⁴⁶² In comparison to Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysios and Maximos, he claims, the "only major point that makes Palamas' thought different, is that he attempts to use a vocabulary that highlights the difference between essence and activity."⁴⁶³

According to Tollefsen, the major Greek fathers from the Cappadocians to Palamas teach that God has both an internal and an external activity (*energeia*).⁴⁶⁴ The internal activity

⁴⁶¹ University of Oslo, <http://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/personer/vit/filosofi/fast/tollefse/index.html> (last accessed: 2017-12-21).

⁴⁶² Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, vi.

⁴⁶³ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 200.

⁴⁶⁴ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 5, 34-35, 47-49, 57-59, 64-66, 75-77, 80-81, 83-84, 88-89, 106-107, 124-125, 188-189, 208.

is the eternal activity within God which is constitutive of, and identical to, his essence; it is also the foundation for the external activity which is God's activity towards creation.⁴⁶⁵ (Tollefsen admits, though, that Palamas himself never explicitly proposes any internal activity within God, yet he insists that this conception is present in his works by implication.)⁴⁶⁶

The character of the internal activity, Tollefsen affirms, "could be said to be the mutual love which the hypostases express towards one another."⁴⁶⁷ The hypostases

are transcendentally perfect manifestations of divine Goodness, Being, Life, Wisdom, etc. *ad intra*. Considered *ad extra* we should note, however, that in actuality there is no plurality of processions, [... and since] all processions *ad extra* are aspects of the one procession of Goodness, [how] much more should the activities *ad intra* constitute one divine activity.⁴⁶⁸

However, when speaking of the ways the divine activity manifests itself in creatures it is convenient to use the plural form in order to name the several "aspects" of the "one single divine activity".⁴⁶⁹ Tollefsen claims that Palamas, too, "indicates that the diversification of the activity is related to or depends on the participants."⁴⁷⁰

Moreover, Tollefsen writes that "the activity out of the essence (*ad extra*) is an aspect of the activity of the essence (*ad intra*)".⁴⁷¹ The external activities

are certain ways in which the essence moves in a modified sense in order to accomplish something externally. [...] The activity is ontologically dependent upon the being that is active, but the activity must be a certain way in which this being modifies itself in order to accomplish external acts. If we know the activity, we do not know the essence of the God who is active, but only get a glimpse that there is a sublime ontological foundation for being active in this way. [...] From several observations of human activity, we may

⁴⁶⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 75-77, 88. Tollefsen also discerns an eternal external activity within God, in the sense that the Father generates the Son and the Spirit by activities *external to him*. These external activities are manifestations of his internal activity – that is, his simple act of knowing and willing them. However, this conception is never recorded to be explicit in the fathers, but only mentioned by Tollefsen as a preliminary interpretation in "an attempt to reason further on theological principles" (48, 81 n84 [quote]; cf. 57-59, 65-66, 75). Yet, more generally he says that the generation of the Holy Trinity is "an *internal activity* that springs from the Father's will" (83 [my emphasis]).

⁴⁶⁶ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 188.

⁴⁶⁷ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 145; cf. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 209.

⁴⁶⁸ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 106.

⁴⁶⁹ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 168-169 (quotes 169, 168).

⁴⁷⁰ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 199.

⁴⁷¹ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 165.

be able to gather what being human is, [... but when] it comes to God, on the other hand, even his activities are not adequately understood.⁴⁷²

The divine activity *ad extra* is, therefore, a “movement of nature” as modified in order to accomplish creation, but not a “movement of nature” as such, Tollefsen affirms.⁴⁷³ Yet, neither the movement *ad extra* nor *ad intra* compromises the immutability of the divine being.⁴⁷⁴ However, Tollefsen writes that “we shall have to talk of divine activities as ways in which *God’s essence become[s] active*”.⁴⁷⁵ “‘Essence’ means the immanent, self-identical being of God, while ‘activity’ means that God *does* something. Activity does not denote something other in God than essence, but is the same divine being as active.”⁴⁷⁶

Presumably Tollefsen would claim something similar about human activity: In our activity *ad extra* we modify our human essence into different activities, such as, writing, running, building, etc., whereas our essence in itself is beyond such activities.⁴⁷⁷ But in contrast to our human activities, God’s activity does not begin and end, but “is a dynamic, powerful presence, almost like a permanent, vibrating energy present in things.”⁴⁷⁸

Tollefsen is urgently aware of the dangers of using the discourse of the essence/energies distinction, and never tires of cautioning against conceiving the *energeia* as a reality of its own.⁴⁷⁹ He thinks that Palamas’ language of a “lower divinity” is unfortunate and explicitly denies that God’s activity should be understood as such.⁴⁸⁰ Furthermore, he repeatedly expresses misgivings about the term “real distinction” (which he ascribes to John Meyendorff), since he feels that it makes the distinction too radical.⁴⁸¹ (Yet, we must point out that the term is used already by Lossky,⁴⁸² and in its Greek form, *pragmatike diakrasis*, even by the *Synodal Tome* of 1368 and John VI Cantacouzenos [d. 1383].)⁴⁸³

Moreover, Tollefsen writes that “the external activity is based on the internal actuality (of a skill) and is an expression of it” in such a way that there is an “*ontological connection and even sameness* between the skill as possessed [*ad intra*] and the skill as produced in the

⁴⁷² Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 91-92.

⁴⁷³ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 89, 94.

⁴⁷⁴ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 92.

⁴⁷⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 125 (my emphasis); cf. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 161.

⁴⁷⁶ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 141 (Tollefsen’s emphasis).

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 168.

⁴⁷⁸ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 99.

⁴⁷⁹ Above 11 (Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 58, 88, 91-92, 128, 131, 168, 186, 192-194).

⁴⁸⁰ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 194; cf. 168.

⁴⁸¹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 86, 168-169, 193, 198, 211-212, 214; Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 140-141.

⁴⁸² E.g. *Mystical Theology*, 73; “Theology of Light”, 56; “Doctrine of Grace”, 77.

⁴⁸³ Demetracopoulos, “Palamas Transformed”, 292, 304.

work [*ad extra*]”.⁴⁸⁴ But even though Tollefsen affirms this ontological sameness between the actuality (*energeia*) *ad intra* and the activity *ad extra* and, at the same time (as we have seen), the identity between the internal activity (*energeia*) and the divine essence, he thinks that it is “quite obvious” that the Greek fathers operate “with the idea of an *ontological distinction* between essence and [the external] activity in God.”⁴⁸⁵ And here is his reason for supposing such an ontological distinction:

The tri-hypostatic being of God is one thing; the activity by which the Trinity relates to created otherness has its source in the essence, but is not identical with this essence. In the immanent activity of God the divine persons communicate with each other; in the external activity God communicates with creatures. Such a distinction between essence and activity must be observable in created beings as well. There is a difference between being human and doing human things, even though the second depends upon the first.⁴⁸⁶

One has to agree, I think, that to be human and to do human things is obviously not the same thing, and that, likewise, there is a difference between being God and being active as God in creation. But one might question whether it is appropriate to label this distinction “ontological”, since Tollefsen himself affirms, as we have seen, that *the internal activity is identical to the essence*, that *the external activity is God’s essence as active* and that there is an *ontological sameness* between God’s internal and external *energeia*.

However, for Tollefsen, the “ontological status of the external activity [...] must be distinguished from the internal activity in such a way that it cannot as such be identified with what constitutes the essence”.⁴⁸⁷ Yet, one may wonder: Since the external activity has nothing to do with the constitution of the essence, in what sense may this activity be said to have any “ontological status” at all? Because, as we have seen, ontology is generally thought to be about essences.⁴⁸⁸ Since ontology primarily concerns the one or the “what” that is active and not the activity itself, it would be rather odd to ask for the ontological status of, say, the *falling* of a stone or the *walking* of a zebra.

Anyhow, I find Tollefsen’s affirmation of an ontological distinction quite surprising, since he devotes so much effort to clarify that the divine activities are not any “beings” or

⁴⁸⁴ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 88 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸⁵ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 168 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸⁶ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 168.

⁴⁸⁷ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 76.

⁴⁸⁸ Above 56.

“entities” with a reality of their own.⁴⁸⁹ To me, it seems that the affirmation of an *onto*-logical otherness of these activities is very likely, indeed, to lead towards a conception of a distinction of *be*-ing.

Contrary to Tollefsen, it seems to me that the affirmation of an “ontological distinction” is far worse in this regard than the affirmation of a “real distinction”, because the term “real distinction” does not, in fact, say anything about the nature of this distinction. It could, for instance, refer to a real *ontological* distinction as well as a real *epistemological* distinction.

However, apart from his endorsement of the term “ontological distinction”, it seems to me that Tollefsen presents a rather convincing idea about the teaching of the Greek fathers. In fact, his position resembles that of Staniloae, which might not be all too surprising given that Maximos is the most important father for both.

Yet, I wonder whether Tollefsen’s interpretation may be labelled “Palamism or not,” that is, whether it really is “the doctrine of St Gregory Palamas”.⁴⁹⁰ There are obviously different interpretations of Palamas’ doctrine of the essence/energies distinction, and the difficulty of determining what he really means is emphasized, for instance, by one of the brightest philosophical minds of Orthodoxy today, namely, David Bentley Hart.⁴⁹¹

In Tollefsen’s explication of Palamas the previous fathers apparently determine the interpretation. Besides, the more problematic expressions of Palamas are conveniently omitted. If Tollefsen wants to establish his interpretation in future scholarly debate, he would need, I contend, to proceed with an exegetical monograph, which runs through all major difficult passages and shows on a detailed level why his interpretation is the most plausible reading of these particular passages.

⁴⁸⁹ Above 11, (Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 58, 88, 91-92, 128, 131, 168, 186, 192-194).

⁴⁹⁰ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 169.

⁴⁹¹ Hart, “Hidden and Manifest”, 212, 212 n39.

SUMMARIZING EVALUATION

This concluding chapter will summarize and evaluate the opinions of the essence/energies distinction in Lossky, Ware and Staniloae, elucidated also by Tollefsen's more recent assessment of the Greek fathers. I will proceed by highlighting and evaluating seven critical points that have been actualized through the thesis, of which the last four directly deal with the essence/energies distinction. The last three, furthermore, correspond to the first two of the aspects, presented in the "Introduction", that have constituted the guideline for my examinations. In this chapter, references will be provided only for explicit quotes and the few additions of source material, and *not* for summaries of previous content.

Reason in theology

Lossky has in general a rather sceptical attitude towards human reason. For him, the only way to acquire any real knowledge about God is to leave reason behind and, instead, ascend to union with God. Thus he seems to presuppose that there is an opposition between reason and union with God. However, his understanding of reason must, I think, be understood in relation to the all too positivistic and rationalistic theology of his contemporaries and predecessors in both Russia and Western Europe. In fact, Lossky himself seems to have a rather positivistic understanding of concepts – and that is precisely why, I would argue, he thinks that a radical

break with conceptual thinking is the only way for the mystical theology of the Eastern Church.

In order to surpass reason Lossky recourses to a dialectical *method of antinomy*. An antinomy is, for him, the affirmation of two equally true yet contradicting statements which places us before a certain divine mystery and leads us away from conceptual thinking towards union with God.

Lossky claims that the doctrines of God may only be expressed as antinomies and strives to explicate every doctrine in an antinomic fashion. Consequently, he pushes the formulations of these doctrines into as sharp contradictions as is possible. He affirms, for instance, that God's *ousia* and hypostases are actually synonymous, that we may participate in the divine essence which per definition is imparticipable, and that the divine essence is not present in the uncreated energies but, yet, virtually identical to them. In the face of these irresolvable contradictions one will proceed to an experience of union with the super-essential Trinity who is beyond all knowledge.

However, it is worth noting that in constructing his antinomies, Lossky works in the rationalist tradition of Kant, Florensky and Bulgakov. Moreover, his pronounced dichotomist thought in general, evident in his inclination to put things in opposition to each other (contemplation contra reason, joy contra suffering, East contra West, etc.), implies a rather rationalistic approach. In his antinomic and dichotomist constructions, I would contend, Lossky pushes his theology into a rationalistic scaffolding which is foreign to the Greek fathers. Thus, he seems to structure reality according to a given methodological pre-assumption which excludes other (more plausible, dynamic and creative) ways of engaging with one's Christian experience and theological learning.

Precisely because his scaffolding is rationalistic, Lossky is justified in claiming that without antinomy one will fall "from the contemplation of divine mysteries into the platitude of rationalism, replacing living experience with concepts."⁴⁹² Yet, apart from this Losskian framework, it is, of course, perfectly possible to work out a plausible Orthodox theology which is neither antinomic (in the Losskian sense) nor rationalistic.

Ware emphasizes human reason in so far as it is used with discernment within its proper sphere. Yet, it is "damaged by sin, both original and personal, and it therefore requires to be healed and transfigured by divine grace." Moreover, reason does "not constitute the only or even the most important means that man has for apprehending spiritual truth."⁴⁹³ Therefore,

⁴⁹² Lossky, "Theology of Light", 52.

⁴⁹³ Ware, "Debate about Palamism", 46.

says Ware, theology must not be restricted by the rules and methods of natural sciences. He claims that Orthodox theologians since the first fathers emphasize and utilize reason as a gift of God; they strive to be coherent and intelligible, while insisting on God's incomprehensibility and our human limitations.

However, Ware continues, since spiritual truth lies beyond the apprehension of reason we must pass beyond discursive reason to the level of *nous*, or spiritual understanding, in order to apprehend the realm of the divine. Yet he is obviously very reluctant to use discursive reason *also in explicating to others*, as far as is possible, the truths which he might have apprehended through his *nous*. He does simply not seem to think that it is admissible to explicate in ordinary language what is experienced in union with God.

Like Lossky, Ware utilizes antinomic theology. Yet, even though he explicitly refers to Lossky, he has a rather different approach. To Ware, an antinomy does not have to be a direct contradiction and, therefore, he does not need to reformulate the doctrines of the Church in terms of opposites. It is sufficient that the two statements of an antinomy are not fully reconcilable when “regarded exclusively on the level of the discursive reasoning”.⁴⁹⁴

Yet, the purpose of antinomy is the same as with Lossky, namely, to facilitate the ascension towards union with God. But, for Ware, an antinomic approach to the Church's doctrines is not necessary for this ascension – it is only one means among others. However, with the aid of antinomies one may reach beyond human structures of logic towards a spiritual understanding and experience of God. The foundation of Ware's understanding of antinomy is the insight that since God transcends our rational understanding every statement about him needs to be qualified by another.

Staniloae agrees with Lossky and Ware that we may not apprehend God with discursive reason. Yet, he emphasizes that *when we want to express* the knowledge gained through apophatic contemplation we need to resort to the terms of rational knowledge. In theology, therefore, one needs methodologically to pass constantly from the one mode of knowledge to the other. For Staniloae, we must always be aware that we may never adequately express anything of the divine reality with the positive and negative terms of rational knowledge. But still, God possesses in himself what corresponds to both our negative and affirmative terms, although in a totally superior way.

Thus, Staniloae renounces “the too rigid distinction between the intellectual and the apophatic knowledge of God”,⁴⁹⁵ which is sometimes evident in Orthodox theology.

⁴⁹⁴ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 51.

⁴⁹⁵ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

“Negative theology doesn’t justify a laziness of the spirit, an abdication of reason, but requires a continual raising of the scaffolding of reason”.⁴⁹⁶ God has actually revealed himself in both Scripture and the world and, therefore, positive theology is motivated. Moreover, Staniloae writes, “in himself God is the most positive reality.”⁴⁹⁷ Besides, without positive theology Christian life itself would be endangered since the idea of a relationship with God would be very unlikely to appear without any positive affirmation about him.

Furthermore, Staniloae affirms that at the heights of the knowledge of God we are overfilled with meanings in luminous forms rather than in void of them; and it is this abundance of meanings that makes us stop pretending that our reason is their only source and realize that they have their source in a super-reason too. This super-reason “lifts up our reason beyond its powers, *without annulling it.*” “The supreme knowledge of God attains a level which doesn’t do away with reason, but involves it. It activates and uses *all the resources of reason, to the fullest exercise of its powers.*” After our reason is fully exercised “we understand that the domain in which we have penetrated surpasses our limited rational powers, by a plus of light, not by a minus.”⁴⁹⁸ Thus, knowledge of God is not anti-rational, but supra-rational.

However, at the same time, Staniloae is perfectly clear that knowledge of God is *not* achieved by discursive and deductive reasoning, because such reasoning presupposes categories, definitions and distinctions, which, in fact, put limits on the object of knowledge.

The word “antinomy” appears occasionally in Staniloae, but is not a central concept. For him, it does not seem to have retained any of its Kantian content. Since this label is so heavily loaded with the contribution of Kant, Florensky, Bulgakov and especially Lossky, one may argue that it is not plausible to speak of an “antinomic theology” in Staniloae.

Tollefsen affirms the importance of philosophy for theology. According to him, both Palamas and Maximos work consciously by philosophical explications of theological matters.⁴⁹⁹ Even if the object of our knowledge escapes our intellect, Tollefsen affirms, we need to find strategies for speaking and arguing about the teachings which concern God – and we do this by proceeding with *philosophical expositions*.

In evaluation, it seems to me that Ware’s notion of antinomy, in spite of his references to Lossky, manages to pass beyond the Russian religious thought upon which Lossky founds

⁴⁹⁶ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 246.

⁴⁹⁷ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

⁴⁹⁸ All three quotes: Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 208 (my emphasis).

⁴⁹⁹ On Palamas: Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 195; Christocentric Cosmology, 147; and on Maximos: Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 118, 149.

his assessment, towards a more patristic view. Yet, Ware utilizes the word extensively and, thus, contributes to perpetuate this non-patristic word (which Lossky falsely attributes to Palamas) in Orthodox theology. By extension this may contribute to perpetuate the dialectical interpretation of antinomy as professed by Lossky and the Russian religious thinkers.

Both Lossky and Ware are very reluctant to use reason for explicating the divine mysteries. Whereas Lossky recourses to ineffable antinomies, Ware points to the incomprehensibility of the divine reality. Tollefsen, on the contrary, emphasizes the usage of philosophical expositions in theological matters, even though these expositions cannot adequately account for the divine mysteries. In Staniloae the discourse is immensely richer and more nuanced than in both Lossky and Ware. Staniloae affirms the positive aspects of our knowledge of God while yet keeping a sober and apophatic attitude towards the limits of our reason. Unlike Lossky, he affirms that reason is not abolished at the highest level of union, but involved and maximized – even lifted up beyond its powers. Because to him, the highest knowledge of God is supra-rational and not anti-rational.

The apophatic union with God

Lossky conceives of union as intermingling. Therefore, the slightest union of the creature's nature with God's nature would mean the complete absorption into God's nature. Equally, the slightest personal union would mean the complete absorption of the creature's person into the person of the Son. Yet, the divine energies do not, for some unspecified reason, completely absorb the creature's energies in their intermingling union, and therefore an eternal progression is possible in this union.

In our deifying union with God our corruptible nature is transfigured and transformed into likeness with the divine nature. We become uncreated in so far as we reside wholly in the unknowable God. As our prayer of petition ends we enter into a state called "pure prayer",⁵⁰⁰ which is "the perfecting of prayer, and is called spiritual prayer or contemplation. [...] It is absolute peace and rest – *hesychia*."⁵⁰¹ But even in this highest stage of mystical union we will have no other rational notion of God than that he is incomprehensible. We can only attain to God "in the darkness of absolute ignorance."⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 207.

⁵⁰¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 208.

⁵⁰² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 25.

Yet, Lossky affirms, as we advance in the union with God our “consciousness” grows, and this “awareness” is called *gnosis* (knowledge) by the Greek fathers. “In the higher stages of the mystical way, it is fully revealed as *perfect knowledge of the Trinity*.”⁵⁰³ However, this perfect knowledge seems to be restricted to perfect “consciousness” or “awareness”, since “knowledge” is said to be identical to these concepts.

Ware claims that the union with God’s energies in our deification is “immediate”, “unmediated” and “face to face”.⁵⁰⁴ We participate “*fully and entirely* in the uncreated energy”.⁵⁰⁵ In this union we acquire a “genuine knowledge of God” – a knowledge of “God ‘as he is’, although not as he is *in himself*.”⁵⁰⁶ Thus, we do not end up with nothing, but with “an immediate experience of the living God.”⁵⁰⁷ Yet, we may not participate in, or have any knowledge about, the divine essence.

Furthermore, our union with God is “not fusion or confusion”,⁵⁰⁸ but yet, in this union we are “permeated and transfigured by the fire of the Divinity”.⁵⁰⁹ As we, through apophaticism, pass beyond every statement, both positive and negative, we receive not emptiness but fullness. Therefore, says Ware, our apophatic “negations are in reality super-affirmations.”⁵¹⁰

Staniloae is far more explicit than both Lossky and Ware about the highest level of union with God. For Staniloae, the highest stage of apophaticism is apophatic in the sense that it is impossible to express in words the superabundance of supra-positive knowledge which is encountered in it. Such an experience has the character of a vision and union, or a “direct and non-discursive contact with unspeakable and supreme personal reality.”⁵¹¹ It is an overwhelming experience of divine presence, in which we progress eternally, yet without ever exhausting the vision of God.

In the highest stage of union we have gone beyond the abyss which separates our knowledge from God and keeps us on the human side, having arrived at the divine side of knowledge. Our own energies or operations cease and are replaced by divine operations as the divine glory overwhelms the natural attributes. We see and know qualitatively as God and even become subjects of the divine, uncreated love, yet not as source but as recipient. Thus,

⁵⁰³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 217 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰⁴ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128.

⁵⁰⁵ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 132 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰⁶ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 49 (Ware’s emphasis).

⁵⁰⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 15.

⁵⁰⁸ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 23.

⁵⁰⁹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 132.

⁵¹⁰ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 15.

⁵¹¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 343.

“we really participate in the life of the Holy Trinity.”⁵¹² Practically and functionally we are as God, or even gods, though not God – for we have not overstepped our creaturely limits and become the ultimate source of the divine energies. God will eternally remain their only ultimate source, and the deified person is gratuitously aware of that. In the continual progression in the union with God, says Staniloae, one is continuously surprised about what happens to oneself.

Staniloae criticizes Lossky for (like Barlaam) making the silence of “pure prayer” the highest level of the apophatic union.⁵¹³ For Staniloae pure prayer is only the second of his three discerned steps of apophaticism. In pure prayer one does not see God but only feels his presence as the very source of one’s existence. Thus, one sees God only indirectly, while seeing oneself directly. In the third step the opposite is true. Pure prayer remains a state of silence with almost no positive elements of knowledge.

Staniloae is aware that the theme of apophaticism as supra-positive knowledge is not completely absent from the theology of Lossky, but it is not developed and emphasized enough and tends to be absorbed in his notion of the absolute incomprehensibility of God.⁵¹⁴ In this, Staniloae feels that he is more in line with Palamas than Lossky is.

In evaluation Lossky and Ware stay rather vague in their explication of the apophatic union with God. It seems to be consequential to their apophaticism that the more one is united to God, the less one knows him conceptually. While Staniloae agrees that, in our union with God, “concepts are like spoonfuls of water compared to a river or the sea”,⁵¹⁵ he emphasizes that, in the highest level of union, we pass beyond the silence of pure prayer – which is devoid of positive content – to a profound experience of a superabundance of supra-positive knowledge.

While the thought of supra-positive knowledge in the highest stage of deification is not completely absent in Lossky and Ware, Staniloae is clearly more extensive and explicit and speaks with a certainty that makes one wonder if he, in fact, draws from his own experience.

⁵¹² Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 305.

⁵¹³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 238 (cf. 230-244).

⁵¹⁴ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 336 n295, plus a missing paragraph from *Orthodox Spirituality*, quoted and translated by: Berger, “Integral Approach to Spirituality”, 141.

⁵¹⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 343.

Ontology of evil?

Ware and **Tollefsen** affirm that the essence/energies distinction is an ontological distinction. Energies (or activities) in general, they claim, have an ontological status because they distinguish what one *does* from what one *is*. However, it seems to me that if we ascribe ontological status to activities in general, then we must ascribe ontological status to evil activities as well, since there, apparently, are evil activities in the world. Yet Ware himself, in accordance with Christian tradition, explicitly denies ontological status to evil.

The obvious options in resolving this dilemma, so far as I can see, are either to deny *all* activities ontological status or to grant evil activities ontological status, too. While the first option would probably have no consequences for theology, save that some theologians would have to alter their wordings, the second option might entail a revision of the traditional opinion about evil; because it is a novelty, it seems to me, to deny ontological status to *evil* while granting it to *evil activities*.

As we have seen, Zizioulas claims that ontology is usually thought to be about natures; and this seems to be true for Staniloae as well. Therefore, an *onto*-logy of activities might seem to presuppose something more than what Ware and Tollefsen are willing to admit, namely, that the activities have some kind of *be*-ing of their own. In striving to be as clear as is possible, one has to relate in some way to such a common theological notion, I would contend, and explain why one does or does not consent to it – and this pertains even more to those who do not agree with it (here, Zizioulas is a good example to follow).

The eternity of the essence/energies distinction

Lossky argues for the need of the essence/energies distinction from his theology of creation and deification. Yet, in proclaiming the *eternity* of this distinction he does not, as far as I can discern, present any specific argument. Rather, the possibility that the energies would emerge only with creation is *not* something he takes into consideration – he simply affirms that the uncreated energies are co-eternal with the divine essence. The closest Lossky comes to an argument is his claim that God's essence pours forth its glory eternally because it cannot set bounds to itself. But this, too, is rather a proposition than an argument.

Yet, I find his position to be consistent with the general vision of his theology; because it seems to me that with his conception of God's essence as totally repose and the energies as that which contains every movement (such as love, thoughts and wisdom), the emerging of

the energies with creation would have meant a change in God. Therefore, for Lossky, God must be eternally both.

Ware, too, affirms that the essence/energies distinction must be a real and objective *eternal* distinction within the being of God, irrespectively of creation. The basis for this knowledge is our experience of the divine energies which reveal themselves as both hidden and revealed. While God in his energies reveals himself as both immanent and transcendent we have no knowledge whatsoever about God in his essence. To Ware, this proves his case. Yet, he cautiously adds: “All human language about God is inadequate, but it is certainly less misleading to affirm the distinction than to deny it.”⁵¹⁶

This argument from our dim knowledge of the energies is the only argument Ware offers, as far as I can see, in support of the eternity of the essence/energies distinction. Still, it remains inconceivable to me how our dim knowledge about the divine energies may say anything about their relationship to the divine essence of which we know nothing.

Staniloae distinguishes between the divine acts which are intrinsic to the divine essence and those that are directed towards creation. Whereas the eternal energy of God is identical to his essence, that is, his inter-trinitarian communion of love and being, the energies *ad extra* are the communication of himself towards creation. With this conception, Staniloae may account for the creation of the world and God’s eternal manifestation without presupposing any eternal energy outside of the essence (cf. following subchs.).

Tollefsen argues that the Greek fathers distinguish between God’s activity *ad intra* and *ad extra* (this is true even in Palamas, he thinks, though implicitly so). The internal activity is God’s eternal activity which is constitutive of his essence, and the external activity is his activity towards creation. But yet, Tollefsen claims that the uncreated

activity [*ad extra*] belongs eternally to God as the natural property of His being. This means that the activities somehow are *proper* to God’s essence even “before” God relates Himself to anything “other” through them.⁵¹⁷

From what he affirms elsewhere,⁵¹⁸ I would argue that Tollefsen by this only means that God has an eternal potential to create and work in creation. However, if he means something more than this I am at loss to see what he tries to insinuate.

⁵¹⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134.

⁵¹⁷ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 144 (Tollefsen’s emphasis).

⁵¹⁸ See further, Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 144-145; cf. “Appendix”, above, and the following subchs., below.

In evaluation, I would claim that Lossky is coherent within the framework of his own theology. Yet, his conception of the divine essence is, I would argue, rather strained if compared to the general definition by the Greek fathers. When it comes to Ware, I have a hard time imagining that he really thinks he is presenting an argument at all. To me, Staniloae is clearly the one who has presented the most well-argued, traditional and philosophically sound opinion in this matter; and his position is, I think, supported by Tollefsen's recent investigation of the Greek fathers.

The definition of the divine essence

Lossky explicitly denounces the definition of God's essence which includes all that is God. Such a definition, he claims, is an error of the philosophy which considers God as pure act. On the contrary, God is more than essence, not "limited"⁵¹⁹ by the essence, but exists outside the essence too, in his eternal manifestations. God is wholly present on both sides of the limit of the essence.

Yet, if God by definition is more than essence (i.e. also energies), as Lossky claims, then the divine essence cannot, obviously, be the definition of God. Consequently, Lossky alters the traditional definition of God's essence, which holds the essence to be the "what" of God, God's definition or whatever is constitutive of God.

According to the Greek fathers, no essence can exist without energy, and this is true for God as well. Since God cannot exist without energy, his energy must, apparently, be conceived as part of his constitution. However, the energy or activity directed towards creation cannot, of course, be considered as constitutive of God. This apostrophizes Lossky's deficiency to distinguish properly between God's energy *ad intra* and *ad extra* – a deficiency which pushes him to regard all energy as external to God's essence and, thus, to question the conventional definition of essence.

In his super-essential nature God, writes Lossky, "remains as if in absolute repose, *without manifesting Himself in any way.*"⁵²⁰ Since every movement in God is effectively removed to the energies, Lossky seems to make God's essence into a remote reality with no other content than being the tri-unitarian super-essence, completely deprived of any possible feature.

⁵¹⁹ Lossky, "Theology of Light", 56; "Doctrine of Grace", 78; *Mystical Theology*, 77.

⁵²⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 72 (my emphasis).

Furthermore, Lossky claims that God's essence is incommunicable per definition and, therefore, not present in creation – and certainly not knowable to any creature. Thus, even though the Trinity dwells in creation by means of its energies, the divine essence does not.

Ware insists that we cannot have any knowledge whatsoever of God's essence or, as he calls it, the level of metaphysics. He writes that “the divine essence remains for ever above and beyond all participation and all knowledge on the part of any creature, both in this age and in the Age to Come”.⁵²¹ To him, this is “of course *axiomatic* for Orthodox theology”,⁵²² which would simply mean that he cannot provide any argument for it.

Ware affirms, furthermore, that *God's essence is manifested and proclaimed by his energies*. But this does surprisingly not result in any knowledge of the essence on behalf of the creatures. Yet, one wonders how it is possible that the manifestation and proclamation of God's essence do not provide any knowledge of it whatsoever. Or does he mean that the energies only *manifest that there is* an essence beyond their presence in the world? Anyway, in spite of our inability to know anything about God's essence, Ware affirms staunchly, as we have seen, that this essence is eternally distinct from God's energies.

Staniloae is, in comparison to Lossky and Ware, quite clear in his definition of the divine essence. As I understand him, God's essence is the divine Persons in their loving community or, in other words, *God as he is in and for himself*. In this inter-trinitarian communion of perfect love, the divine Persons communicate their very being towards each other, completely and transparently; and since everything that a person communicates towards another is an energy, Staniloae claims, the being – or essence – of God is “communicating energy.”⁵²³ And since this inter-trinitarian movement of love is perfect, it is actually unmoving and stable.

Of course, Staniloae also affirms that the divine essence transcends all our concepts and possibilities of understanding. Yet, in contrast to Ware, this is not axiomatic for him, but has its basis in the apophatic character of person: The person is apophatic in itself and is only “perceived through its acts. It exists on another plane, one which transcends existence. How much more, then, is this true of supreme Person.”⁵²⁴ Only supreme Person is totally apophatic.

Tollefsen affirms that the divine essence, according to the Greek fathers, “means the immanent, self-identical being of God”.⁵²⁵ The “essence of God is His primary (internal)

⁵²¹ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128.

⁵²² Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134 (my emphasis).

⁵²³ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 53.

⁵²⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 127.

⁵²⁵ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 141.

activity (as actuality), an activity that is the essential nature of God.”⁵²⁶ Thus, “essence is basically *energeia*.”⁵²⁷ This internal activity, which Tollefsen identifies with God’s essence, “could be said to be the mutual love which the hypostases express towards one another.”⁵²⁸ In this mutual love the divine persons “proceed towards each other in a way that is beyond knowledge. They are transcendently perfect manifestations of divine Goodness, Being, Life, Wisdom, etc. *ad intra*.”⁵²⁹

In evaluation, the divine essence is, according to mainstream scholars and Church father, the “what” of God, God’s definition or whatever is constitutive of God. Tollefsen, for instance, writes that “the essence is our concept of what the entity at hand is according to definition.”⁵³⁰ While Staniloae is in line with this conventional understanding, Lossky considers it to be an erroneous view of the philosophy which regards God as pure act. For him, the definition of God – the “what” of God – includes the energies, *while the concept of the divine essence does not*. He seems to be aware of the discrepancy and suggests that a study of the concept’s transformation in Latin scholasticism may help to clarify whether the two ways of expression are reconcilable.⁵³¹ Of course, he thinks that his own understanding of the concept is the original notion of the Greek fathers. Yet, this assessment stands, obviously, in stark contrast to the assessment of Tollefsen.

Apparently, Staniloae has a completely different conception of the divine essence than Lossky. Whereas God’s essence according to Lossky is remote, repose and not active or manifested in any way, Staniloae conceives it as the movement, energy, communion and perfect love of the three divine persons who give themselves to each other completely. On this point the opinions of Lossky and Staniloae are, obviously, incommensurable.

The definition of the divine energies

Lossky affirms that the divine energies, in so far as they are communicated towards creation, are identical to grace. Through them the Trinity is really present and manifested in creation; and through them God creates, operates and permeates the whole creation, and intermingles with us according to our capacity to receive him. Union with these energies is the way to deification.

⁵²⁶ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 77.

⁵²⁷ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 75.

⁵²⁸ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 145.

⁵²⁹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 106.

⁵³⁰ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 152.

⁵³¹ Lossky, *Vision of God*, 11.

The energies are that mode of existence of God which is communicable, as they are outside of his inaccessible essence. They “flow eternally from the one essence of the Trinity”,⁵³² and are “forces proper to and inseparable from God’s essence, in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself.”⁵³³ Yet, “God is in no way diminished in His energies; He is wholly present in each ray of His divinity.”⁵³⁴

For Lossky, the energies harbour every movement of God. Even the mutual love between the divine persons is a common manifestation of their “love-energy” outside of the essence – for the trinitarian union “is higher even than love.”⁵³⁵

Ware is following Palamas in equating the divine energies with God’s grace, power and kingdom. The identity between the energies and grace is particularly important, Ware affirms, since the doctrine of the energies thus provides Orthodoxy with a theology of grace. Furthermore, he identifies the energies with love and claims that whenever “Palamas refers to the divine energies, what he means is *nothing else than love in action*.”⁵³⁶ The energies are that “which bring all things into existence and maintain them in being.”⁵³⁷ Through them God reveals himself to creatures. Yet, we may only “dimly comprehend” this revelation.⁵³⁸ Consequently, in his energetic self-disclosure, God is both hidden and revealed, transcendent and immanent.

Even though Ware insists that God’s energies are really and eternally distinct from his essence, he claims that they “signify the whole God as he is in action. God in his entirety is completely present in each of his divine energies”, and through them “the *whole* God in his outgoing love has rendered himself accessible to man.”⁵³⁹

Staniloae conceives of energy as that which a person communicates towards another. Within the inter-trinitarian communion the divine persons communicate themselves to each other fully, continuously and transparently, in “a movement and communion of being and love.”⁵⁴⁰

To creatures God communicates himself on their own level, like a mother who plays with her children. Thus, he never gives himself exhaustively to creatures, but changes for their sake in order to enable communion. Yet, he is wholly present in each operation towards

⁵³² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 73.

⁵³³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70.

⁵³⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 74.

⁵³⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 81.

⁵³⁶ Ware, “Immanent yet Transcendent”, 168 (my emphasis).

⁵³⁷ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 50.

⁵³⁸ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 134.

⁵³⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22 (Ware’s emphasis).

⁵⁴⁰ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 134.

creation. So, whereas the inter-trinitarian energy is God's essence, his uncreated energies *ad extra* are not identical to the essence, but are *God as he is in and for creation*. Yet, for Staniloae, not even the energies *ad extra* are external to the divine essence.

Moreover, Staniloae writes that "the *interior love of the Trinity* [i.e. the divine essence] can be perceived in the work it directs *ad extra*."⁵⁴¹ Through his operations "God makes something of *his being* evident to us".⁵⁴² It is from *the very love each divine person has for the other two persons* that "each person also conveys his love to men."⁵⁴³ In so far as we accept this offer of love, God will carry his love "to us and from us to God and one another,"⁵⁴⁴ and thus raise "creation to the level of inter-Trinitarian love and deification."⁵⁴⁵

Tollefsen affirms that for the Greek fathers "the activity out of the essence (*ad extra*) is an aspect of the activity of the essence (*ad intra*)";⁵⁴⁶ it "is God *in relation to His creatures*",⁵⁴⁷ which only emerges as such with the creation, as "a dynamic, powerful presence, almost like a permanent, vibrating energy present in things."⁵⁴⁸ For Tollefsen, there is an ontological "sameness"⁵⁴⁹ between God's activity *ad intra* and *ad extra*, which explains why the energies *ad extra* may be thought of as "works without a beginning".⁵⁵⁰

Furthermore, Tollefsen affirms that God's external activity simply means what he *does in relation to creation*, in contrast to what he *is*. The external activities are actually "certain ways in which the essence moves in a modified sense in order to accomplish something externally."⁵⁵¹ Yet, God's external activities do not bring us any knowledge of his essence – indeed, we may not even grasp his activities adequately.

In evaluation Lossky, Ware, Staniloae and Tollefsen all seem to agree that the energies *ad extra* are God as he communicates himself to creation. These energies are generally equated with God's grace, love and creative activity. But while Staniloae and Tollefsen are quite explicit about that the energies *ad extra* are what God *in his essence* – yet attuned to our level – does in relation to creation, Lossky would never accept such a statement whereas

⁵⁴¹ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 68 (my emphasis).

⁵⁴² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 128 (my emphasis). As we have seen, in Romanian theology "being" is in general rendered as "essence".

⁵⁴³ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 253.

⁵⁴⁴ Staniloae, *Experience of God*, vol. 1, 243.

⁵⁴⁵ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 55.

⁵⁴⁶ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 165.

⁵⁴⁷ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 144 (Tollefsen's emphasis).

⁵⁴⁸ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 99.

⁵⁴⁹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 88.

⁵⁵⁰ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 165.

⁵⁵¹ Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation*, 91.

Ware remains rather ambiguous on the matter. To Lossky, the energies are precisely that which is not essence, although virtually – and ineffably – identical to it.

The relationship between God’s essence and energies

Lossky’s apprehension of the relationship between God’s essence and energies is completely in line with his antinomic thought in general. In order to explain the relationship, Lossky provides an analogy of the sun’s rays which are inseparable, yet different, from the solar disk – but in comparison, he clarifies, “the distinction between essence and energies is more radical, and at the same time their unity is infinitely greater, even to the point of identity.”⁵⁵² If I understand him properly, he is saying that the essence is by no means the energies and the energies is by no means the essence, but yet, they are virtually identical.

For Lossky, God cannot be “limited” by his essence, but is more than essence – eternally external to the essence. Thus, he implies that the radicality of the essence/energies distinction may be expressed in terms of a “limit”. The energies are *precisely not* the essence, but the eternal outpourings of the essence. Yet, God himself may not be divided “into knowable and unknowable. [...] He remains identical in these two modes of existence: the same, and at the same time, different” – wholly present in both.⁵⁵³ But still, God’s essence is incommunicable, in absolute repose, whereas the communicable energies are the eternal movement outside the limit of the divine super-essence.

As we have seen, Lossky’s antinomic explication of the essence/energies distinction necessitates him to alter the conventional definition of essence. Obviously, if God by definition is more than essence (i.e. also energies), as Lossky claims, the divine essence cannot be what God is according to definition.

Ware writes, on the one hand, that “God *in his entirety* is *completely present* in each of his divine energies”⁵⁵⁴ – “that the *whole* God is inaccessible, and that the *whole* God in his outgoing love has rendered himself accessible to man”;⁵⁵⁵ yet, on the other hand, he writes that “the divine essence remains for ever above and beyond all participation and all knowledge on the part of any creature”,⁵⁵⁶ and keeps insisting that there is a real, objective

⁵⁵² Lossky, “Doctrine of Grace”, 77.

⁵⁵³ Lossky, “Theology of Light”, 55-56.

⁵⁵⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22 (my emphasis).

⁵⁵⁵ Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 22 (Ware’s emphasis).

⁵⁵⁶ Ware, “Hidden and Revealed”, 128.

and even ontological distinction between God's essence and energies eternally within God, irrespectively of our limited possibility of understanding.

The fact that these two lines of expression are never juxtaposed and elaborated on together, contributes to the ambiguity of Ware's explication. Yet, I think that it may be possible to reconcile these two ways of expression if we take the liberty of explicating what is only implicated in them: Implicated in the first line of expression, one could argue, is that *God's very essence* is "completely present" in its energies and "accessible" to creatures through God's love for them – although without revealing anything of itself; and implicated in the second, I think, is Ware's understanding that a "real", "objective" or "ontological" distinction simply means a distinction between different aspects of "reality itself". Therefore, to him, there is a real, objective and ontological distinction between what one *is* and *does*.

From this it would follow that God's essence is completely present in his energies, in the sense that God is fully present as he *is* in everything that he *does*. Yet since this distinction, for Ware, is also eternal, the reconciling interpretation I have provided would imply that God "does" eternally. However, I am not sure what this eternal "doing" would mean according to Ware – especially since it remains eternally distinct from what God is in himself. Anyway, this is one way to begin to reconcile Ware's two different strands of thought.

Staniloae's point of view has necessarily been unveiled already in the previous subchapters because of the intrinsic interconnectedness between the essence and energies – or being and operations (as he prefers it) – in his assessment.

Here follows the main points of his contribution: The divine essence is the inter-trinitarian communion of love. From this love, each divine person communicates the very love which he has for the other divine persons towards creation. Thus, the divine operations in creation are not external to the essence, but simply the trinitarian God as attuned to our creaturely level. Through these operations something of God's inter-trinitarian love – or essence – may be perceived by his creatures. Deification consists of being raised to the level of this inter-trinitarian love. Yet, we may never become Gods by essence.

Hence, the most revealing way to put it, I think, is that the essence/energies distinction in Staniloae actually is a distinction between *God as he is in and for himself* and *God as he is in and for creation*. However, it is important to note that the discourse of an "essence/energies distinction" does not, in any obvious way, account for Staniloae's notion of *the inter-trinitarian energy of God* which is identical to his essence. On the contrary, such a discourse, I would argue, is prone to push the original contribution of Staniloae in the direction of the

neo-Palamism of Lossky and his followers (which is evident from a few other interpretations of Staniloae's notion of the relationship between God's essence and energies).

Tollefsen's opinion has, as with Staniloae, necessarily already emerged, since God's essence and energies, for him too, are so integrally interconnected. The most important points in his interpretation of the Greek fathers are that God's essence is identical to his internal activities and perfectly manifested in the loving relationship between the divine persons; and that the external activities are the movement of God's essence as modified in order to accomplish something outside itself.

Thus, the essence/energies distinction, for Tollefsen, is a distinction between what God *is* in himself and *does* in relation to creation. Yet, as with Staniloae, the discourse of the essence/energies distinction obscures the identity between God's essence and his internal activity, which Tollefsen has uncovered in the Greek fathers.

In evaluation Lossky succeeds in constructing the essence/energies distinction as an ineffable antinomy, just as he intends to. According to his dialectical mind one should pass continuously between contemplating the one and the other mode of existence. Through this method one will leave the limited reason and pass through contemplation to union with God. However, whether this antinomy actually leads to union with God or simply remains unrevealing will probably depend more on the pre-disposition of the reader than on the antinomic method itself. Furthermore, in order to sustain his antinomic explication of this distinction he is necessitated to alter the traditional definition of essence. This may, according to Orthodox standards, be thought of as a weakness in his theology.

When it comes to Ware, he does never really seem to settle on certain track. As is typical for him, I would contend, his inclusive reconciling mind wants to keep as many doors open as is possible. Yet, in the case of the essence/energies distinction he seems to be divided between two paths that do not really point in the same direction. But as I have shown, a reconciliation between these two paths may be possible to some extent. Yet, even so, the question remains of how exactly he conceives of God's eternal "doing", since he claims that it is both God in his entirety and, yet, eternally distinct from what God is in himself. If one would press him on this point, I cannot really tell whether he would prefer the option of Lossky or Staniloae.

It seems to me that Staniloae is the one who has presented the most clear and coherent interpretation of the relationship between the essence and energies of God. Central to his position is the distinction between God's inter-trinitarian energy of being and love – identical to the divine essence – and the uncreated energy directed towards creation. His proposition of

an identity between the divine essence and the inter-trinitarian energy, in which each divine person eternally and completely goes out of himself in love towards the other divine persons in an unmoving movement, makes it possible to account for both God's eternal manifestation and his operations towards creation without having to presuppose an eternal energy distinct from God's essence. Staniloae's position is, it seems to me, not only different from Lossky's, but even – on some points – incommensurable.

As for Tollefsen, it remains unclear to me in exactly what sense God's activity *ad extra* may be said to be "a permanent ontological *proprium* of the divine being."⁵⁵⁷ Apart from that, his assessment of the Greek fathers resembles the opinion of Staniloae. Since he does not show any specific acquaintance with Staniloae, their similarities may probably be explained by their common favoured father, namely, Maximos. Yet, Tollefsen's lack of engagement with Staniloae makes it all the more interesting that he actually provides Greek patristic evidence for the opinion of Staniloae, in contradistinction to the opinion of Lossky.

Epilogue

To me, Staniloae is clearly the one of the three theologians treated in this thesis who has presented the most well-argued and coherent interpretation of the relationship between God's essence and energies. I find it hard to appreciate the notion in Lossky and Ware of an eternal distinction between God's essence and energies, because they simply do not provide any significant reason for such a claim. Since both of them promote a radical apophatic approach towards the essence of God, they would need to provide strong arguments in order to justify their right to affirm such a distinction which, in fact, concerns this totally incomprehensible essence. But on the contrary, Lossky works with the assumption of an ineffable antinomy, whereas Ware supports his position exclusively with reference to our dim knowledge of the communicable energies of God.

However, if it is in accordance with the Orthodox doctrine of the essence/energies distinction to say, with Staniloae, that God's being is *God as he is in and for himself* whereas his operations are *God as he is in and for creation*, or, with Tollefsen, that God's essence is what he *is* whereas his activity *ad extra* is what he *does*, then I wonder why one would want to express this with the conception of a *distinction* at all.

Surely, no-one has ever thought that what one does *ad extra* would be *identical* with what one is. Thus, the very proposition of such a *distinction* would beg the question about the

⁵⁵⁷ Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology*, 165.

peculiar character of this relationship. In proclaiming a certain distinction in a matter where this distinction is already too obvious, it seems to me, one may create confusion rather than clarity. Therefore, the very proclamation of a doctrine of a certain *distinction* between what God is and does, may risk to be understood as implying something more than what is intended.

Moreover, if Staniloae's opinion should be normative, I wonder whether the terms "operations" and "energies" really are the most clear and efficient renderings of *energeiai*. When speaking pastorally on behalf of the Orthodox Church, or in dialogue with non-Orthodox or non-Christians, it may be preferable to use the word "grace", I think, because grace has a more uniquely Christian ring to it and is generally understood to designate *God in his self-communication towards creation* – which is exactly what Staniloae means with God's operations. On the contrary, neither operations nor energies are generally thought to imply any direct personal presence.

Especially today, in our utilitarian, busy and questioning western culture, it is of great importance, I would contend, to strive to find the words which best communicate their content, because otherwise there is an immediate risk of making Orthodox faith appear as something rather different from what it is.

Just as the word "*filioque*" seems to imply that the Spirit proceeds from the Son in the same sense as from the Father; the "infallibility of the pope" seems to imply that the pope is infallible as person; "created grace" seems to imply that grace is by definition created; the "*pura natura*" seems to imply the actual existence of such a pure nature; and God as "being itself" seems to imply that God is simply the being of creation, rather than beyond being; so too may "the essence/energies distinction" seem to imply a distinction of two realities – a division of "God into knowable and unknowable."⁵⁵⁸

All of these propositions are obviously false. Yet, this shows, I believe, that theology today cannot any longer afford the luxury of presupposing the goodwill of its potential addressees. Thus, if one wants to pronounce a philosophically sound theology today, one might want to refrain from obscuring (though perhaps traditional) formulations and seek to find words that will be understood as they are intended to.

I am in no way encouraging the abandonment of biblical language or of the traditional expressions of the seven ecumenical councils. I am only suggesting that theology today might need to reconsider some locally developed expressions of the different Christian traditions

⁵⁵⁸ A position which Lossky emphatically denies ("Theology of Light", 55).

which have not received general approval in both East and West, and which, in our contemporary cultural setting, may seem to imply something rather different from what is intended.

According to Ware, Palamas affirms that what matters are not the formulations but the “realities”.⁵⁵⁹ However, I cannot fully agree with this, because the very wordings are the containers and mediators of the content, and are supposed to render this content as sober and clear as is possible. If one cares about the reception of Orthodoxy in the non-Orthodox world (a reception which eventually may contribute to conversions and, perhaps, increasing agreement with other Churches) one might want to find words that work effectively in this world – just as the first Christians did in their Hellenistic environment (or as God himself did in his communication with the Jewish prophets).

Thus, in so far as one apprehends the essence/energies distinction in terms of what God is (in himself) and does (*ad extra*), I would suggest, for the sake of clarity, that one omits the word “distinction” and translates *energeiai* with “grace”.

⁵⁵⁹ Ware, “Debate about Palamism”, 55.

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