

From the Cappadocian Fathers to Gregory
Palamas
The Defeat of Trinitarian Theology

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WHY did the Church define the doctrine of the Trinity? Because according to her the Christian God who acts and reveals himself in the course of salvation history as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is none other than and not different from what he *is*. As the English theologian Prestige puts it, 'It was assumed, that the divine [persons] disclosed in the course of revelation...correspond to real and permanent facts in the life of God' (*God in Patristic Thought*, 301). It is God himself, his eternal being, with whom we have contact in the history of salvation, not just created effects, indifferent to what and how the actor is. Therefore we are entitled to conclude: Father, Son and Spirit, known as agents of our salvation, are God himself -- one Holy Trinity. This principle is at the bottom of the method which the Fathers of the Ancient Church use in their trinitarian theology. For practical reasons I will confine myself to the pneumatological field, historically speaking to the Great Cappadocians, although it would be easy to show the same regarding the Son, e.g. in the works of Athanasius of Alexandria. On the one hand the Cappadocian Fathers presuppose the knowledge of what the Spirit is: his being God and his being the hypostasis Spirit distinct from the Father and the Son. They take it from the information the Bible gives about him, first of all from the words of Christ. Yet on the other hand they find it necessary to prove what they already know in a second train of arguments: they deduce it from his actions. The experience of what he does in the life of the Church and of the Christian individual allows of but one conclusion: he must be God, no less than Father and Son. The same result follows from our soteriological interest: we could not be saved, if the Spirit who changes our lives were but a creature. The actions of the Spirit are nothing alien to his being, but are specifically *his*; therefore they reveal what he *is*. They reveal his being God and also his being God as the third trinitarian person vis-à-vis the Father and the Son; the latter, because he acts in a certain

order together with them: all the Trinity does, takes its starting point from the Father, passes through the Son and reaches its goal in the Spirit — this goal being the transformation of man. This order is not rooted in a temporal decision of the divine persons to enter history in such a relationship instead of, e.g., the other way around, but in their eternal being. God's saving presence in the world does not leave anything behind, closed up in inaccessible transcendence, neither the divinity of the trinitarian persons nor the relationships in which they *are*. Therefore the conclusions drawn on the bases of salvation history have the same result as the direct information about the Spirit presupposed.

These principles are put to the test by the way the Cappadocian Fathers treat the problem of the procession of the Spirit. They have no particular interest in this problem, except for certain statements of Gregory of Nyssa. But every now and then they extend their arguments about the temporal relationships between the Spirit, the Son, and the Father backwards, so to speak, to the eternal, ontological level, thereby casually stating the *processus per Filium*. This casual way of arguing is significant: it shows that the important point is not this or that formula, but the understanding of the relationship between the being and acting of the Trinity.

A thousand years later another Greek theologian puts forward a similar argument: Gregory Palamas. He, too, deduced from a soteriological experience and a soteriological interest an ontological distinction in God, namely the experience of and the interest in divine grace. The life of the Christian is penetrated and sustained by grace, otherwise there would be no salvation. Yet what is this divine grace? The greatness of our experience and the thoroughness of salvation show that it must be God himself. It is not something created, an entity linked to God only *causaliter*, as it is according to the scholastic doctrine of *gratia creata*: no, it is $\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\tau\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma$, *gratia genita non facta*. The Christian individual who receives the divine grace is thereby penetrated by and united to God, becomes divine, himself God.

Yet at the same time God and man can never be identical; God remains independent of his own unity with the divinized Christian — an axiomatic statement which has its roots in neoplatonic philosophy as well as in the judaeo-christian doctrine of creation. God cannot be just grace, just what is present of him in the world. If both points are taken equally seriously — and they have to be — there must be a distinction, a double reality in God himself: God insofar as he is *grace*, being received by and becoming one with man, and God insofar as he is beyond any possibility of contact with created beings and remains unalterably transcendent, inaccessible. In Palamas' famous formula: God as being *energeiai* and God as being *ousia*, essence.

This distinction is not just an epistemological one, not just our way of

perceiving God — the seriousness of our interest in divine grace and the reality of our experience of it on the one hand, the axiomatic transcendence on the other, require it to be an ontological one. Metaphysical notions like that of divine simplicity cannot contradict these fundamental data, but rather have to be interpreted according to them, as is being done in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity. The distinction of essence and energies in God is equally ontologically real as the one of Father, Son, and Spirit. Consequently Palamas uses some classical formulas developed within the doctrine of the Trinity in order to characterize the distinction between essence and energies, e.g. the 'genitum, non factum' quoted above¹ or the famous sentence οὐκ ἦν ποτε ὅτι οὐκ ἦν², and he compares the opposition to this system with Arianism.³

Yet what does Palamas do with the doctrine of the Trinity? Does the application of trinitarian formulas to the system of *ousia* and *energeiai* mean that he wants to substitute the latter for the former? Not at all; according to him there are in God essence, persons *and* energies. But then, what soteriological functions can there be left to Father, Son, and Spirit? Let us confine ourselves again to the Spirit: is there any task left for him in the renewal, divinization of man? Is not all this being done by the divine energies?

Indeed, the trinitarian persons have no soteriological functions. This observation is fundamental in the context of palamite theology: the *hypostaseis* do not enter the created world, they simply *are*. This is in the last analysis true even of the Son. And of course, how could they enter the world, since they belong to that level in God, which is defined as being unalterably beyond the sphere of soteriological contact with his energies, namely the level of divine essence? As God's *ousia* is and nothing else, so they *are*, self-sufficient, inaccessible from eternity to eternity.

How can we know then, that God is Father, Son, and Spirit? By means of special information. The Bible tells us about it, particularly the words of Christ, and several authorities of the Church, having received a special revelation from God. To us, ordinary Christians, there is nothing left but to accept that, beyond the divine reality which reveals itself to us in the course of our salvation, in the experience of grace, there is another level in God, the trinitarian one, which is God's inner, essential, primary being.

Here we have the fundamental difference between Palamas' system and the classical patristic doctrine of the Trinity, a difference which means nothing less than the complete defeat of trinitarian theology. The distinction in God, which in the eyes of the fourth century allowed men to understand his action and revelation in the world as action and revelation of his innermost, essential being, according to Palamas is raised above any connection with the world and history, closed up in itself. What we have contact with is God himself, but a secondary reality in his

being. Compared to the Fathers of the fourth century, this characteristic of Palamas' theology is soteriological modesty.

It is not only Palamas who shows this modesty regarding the way he understands the relationship between God and his action. We find it already before him in the anti-Latin tradition that attacks the *filioque*. This tradition does not talk about energies in God in addition to the trinitarian persons. Yet one of its basic arguments is the independence of the eternal ontological relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit on the one hand and of their temporal relationships on the other. The latter depend simply and purely on God's free decision, which could have organized them in a completely different way, and, according to Photios, indeed has done so every now and then.⁴ They have nothing to do with God's being: in God the Spirit is related directly to the Father, in history, at least normally, to the Father through the Son. To claim that the temporal relationships are the result of the eternal ones and reveal them, as Western theology does, would mean a violation of the mystery of the Trinity's inner being, which is and remains closed within itself. Consequently according to the anti-*filioque* tradition also, we get to know about the eternal Trinity not while reflecting on the history of salvation, but by special information. The mystics of the same period find this information at the top of their ascent to God, in immediate vision. The synthesis of the fourth century is past.⁵

Before I finish, I have to face an objection which will certainly be brought up: Have the Cappadocian Fathers themselves not already stated a difference between essence and energies in God and declared the impossibility of passing beyond the energies to the divine *ousia*? Regardless of the problem whether according to them this distinction is an ontological or just an epistemological one, they undoubtedly have argued like this, especially Gregory of Nyssa. Likewise undoubtedly in this context they do not understand the history of salvation as being rooted in a distinction in God on the level of his essential being. Yet this indicates that here we find a split within their theology: where they talk about divine energies, they do not talk at all about the trinitarian persons but remain completely within the field of the classical problem of the One and the Many. From here, of course, it is easy to draw a line to Palamas, and this has often been done. Yet one cannot overlook the other complex, that of trinitarian theology, where with regard to the history of Christian dogma they have become so much more important. In this context the relationship of Palamas to the Fathers of the fourth century must be judged as the defeat of trinitarian theology.

REFERENCES

1. *Opera* (ed. Christou, Thessaloniki 1962 ff.) II 127,9; 81,1; comp. III 207,2f.
2. *Ibid.* III 122,4f.; II 126,18 et pas.
3. *Ibid.* II 179,3; III 369,16.
4. *P.G.* 101, 909C. 912A-D.
5. cf. D. Wendebourg, *Geist oder Energie. Zur Frage der innergöttlichen Verankerung des christlichen Lebens in der byzantinischen Theologie* (Munich, 1980).