

The Knowable-Unknowable Triune God: Gregory Palamas's Essence-Energy Distinction from the Perspectives of Vladimir Lossky and Catherine Mowry LaCugna

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Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is a synthesis of biblical data about God. The doctrine speaks of a real relationship between an eternal Son who had real preexistence and His Father. It reveals that the Father sent the Son into the world for the salvation of humanity. Because of what God accomplished in the Son, who is both fully God and fully human, a believer by grace is now enabled to become what God is by nature. Even though the word "Trinity" is never found in the pages of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, it is a doctrine that legitimately flows from all that is found on God and His nature in the biblical writings. Important to this clarification was the need for opposing viewpoints.

The notion of some kind of transcendent God is common to many religions, including Christianity. Yet, Christianity posits the same God as knowable and able to be experienced. Both Eastern and Western Christianity have wrestled with this paradox. What does it mean for God to be knowable? How can He be knowable if He is wholly transcendent? To these questions, Gregory Palamas, the widely recognized saint in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, attempted to provide plausible answers built off the understanding of the Triune God as expressed from the Holy Bible. For Gregory, and the Orthodox church in general, the experience of God leading to union with God is of prime importance; this experience and union can only come from knowing God in some way.

In recent decades, the views of Gregory have found renewal in the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky. On the other hand, these views of Palamas have also found a critical¹ audience, of whom one was the Roman Catholic theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna. In any spiritual-intellectual exercise where one contemplates on and probes into God's nature, controversy is indispensable to the crafting of solid doctrine.

God Unknowable

God is essentially spirit, and while other spirit creatures exist, God differs from them in that He is transcendent.² This means that God is “above, beyond, other than, and more than the world. . . . God is above and beyond all creation.”³ Because God is beyond His creation, He is also beyond the rational capabilities of human beings. Writing on the need for the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's ascertaining the truths of God expressed in the Bible, Millard Erickson notes that this necessary work of the Holy Spirit comes from the fact that God is transcendent. He points out that God “goes beyond our categories of understanding. He can never be fully grasped within our finite concepts or by our human vocabulary.”⁴ Karl Barth, as Erickson has observed, also saw God as Unknown.⁵ The transcendence of God is a virtual given among most modern, orthodox, Christian theologians.

1. The term “critical” here is in no way related to the ideas of cynical or adversative. Rather, in this context, the idea is that of constructive scrutiny.

2. Vladimir Lossky contends that transcendence cannot be separated from immanence. He argues, “Immanence and transcendence mutually imply one another. . . . [i]f one conceives God as the transcendent cause of the universe, He cannot be purely transcendent since the very idea of cause implies that of effect.” Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 31. For the purposes of this paper, this section will use transcendence apart from immanence in order to keep the focus that God is unknowable in His essence.

3. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), 518.

4. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 273.

5. *Ibid.*, 340.

Eastern Orthodox theology understands God's transcendence in a similar way. Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, in establishing the necessity of apophatic⁶ theology, writes that the mind must "raise itself to the notion of a God who transcends all relation with created being, absolutely independent, in what He is, of the existence of creatures."⁷ George W. Morrel said of Lossky that "no Western neo-Reformation theologian exceeds Lossky" concerning the focus on the transcendence of God.⁸

As John D. Zizioulas traces the background of ideas that led to the development of apophaticism, the key statement is found in Maximus the Confessor, an important post-Nicene theologian for Orthodoxy theology: "God has 'a simple, unknowable existence, inaccessible to all things and completely unexplainable.'"⁹ Gregory of Palamas, in Meyendorff's view, saw that to affirm an all-transcendent God is to affirm that God is the One who created all things out of nothing.¹⁰

God's transcendence lies in the fact that God differs in being from the rest of creation; He is pure actuality, eternal, infinite, omnipotent, omnipresent—just to name a few attributes.¹¹ His essence is utterly incomprehensible in classical Christian metaphysics. Both Eastern and Western theologians affirm the idea of God's incomprehensible essence.¹² The notion of God's incomprehensible essence is the

6. "Apophaticism consists in negating that which God is not." Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 32.

7. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 14.

8. George W. Morrel, "Theology of Vladimir Lossky," *Anglican Theological Review* 41, no. 1 (January 1959): 37.

9. Maximus the Confessor, preface to *The Church's Mystagogy*, quoted in John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 90.

10. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 77.

11. Geisler covers the attributes of God quite extensively. See Geisler, 30–406.

12. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, UK: James Clarke and Co. Ltd., 1957), 70; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 10. Lossky and LaCugna both come from traditions that theologically follow the Fathers. This reason is perhaps the most plausible as to why they hold the orthodox Christian view on transcendence. Some Protestants, like Geisler, appear, on the basis of God's transcendence, to deny that God is unknowable. There are Protestants, on the other hand, such as James D. G. Dunn who, as Daniel Boyarin has

logical outworking of the idea that God is above, beyond, and other than His creation. “[W]e can never seize His essence, else He would be determined by His attributes.”¹³ The issue then arises as to how God can be knowable.

The Energies of God

While the Christian scriptures spoke of the transcendence of God (such as Exodus 33:20–23; John 1:18), they also spoke of the reality that God can be known in some sense (for example, Jeremiah 31:34; John 14:6–9). Because they could not neglect these statements, post-Nicene church fathers and theologians sought to explain how God could be knowable despite being totally transcendent. The earliest ones to address this paradox were the Cappadocians. Their solution was to keep the unknowable essence of God, but to posit energies that are distinct from His essence, but are through which we are able to know Him.¹⁴

Exactly how to define God’s energies is somewhat confusing because various Orthodox theologians vary somewhat in their definitions. Meyendorff views the divine energies as God in action; the acts of God are God’s energies.¹⁵ Lossky, in his different works, looks as if he has at least a couple of ideas as to what the energies are: the divine names—by which he evidently means Father, Son, and Holy Spirit¹⁶—and the attributes of God.¹⁷ Like Lossky, Boris Bobrinskoy also sees the energies as divine

observed, preserves the transcendence of God. See Geisler, 527; Daniel Boyarin, “The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (July 2001): 255n43.

13. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 33.

14. For a synopsis of the Cappadocians on the divine essence-energy distinction, see Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Bedfordshire, UK: The Faith Press, 1963), 64–69.

15. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 187.

16. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 48.

17. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 80.

attributes and names; he additionally calls them “divine revelations” and “forms of the personal presence of Christ.”¹⁸ This variety indicates that at least one common definition of the energies exists in Orthodoxy, that freedom is available as to how one may describe the energies, and that scholars also somewhat disagree in the way they understand them. At a deeper level, though, there is a general agreement: namely, communication of God in His person(s) and/or attributes.

Clear is the distinction in Eastern Orthodoxy between the divine energies and the divine essence. The general philosophical idea of essence had to do with ontology—that is, what it means to be something,¹⁹ or the nature of that thing. The essence of God refers to whatever makes God, God. Since this essence is truly unknowable, one cannot rationally know what it means to be God, and one cannot experience directly God as He is transcendent. Instead, to allow one to experience Himself, God reveals Himself in His energies—“the transcendent *acts* on the immanent level.”²⁰

Meyendorff connects the concept of nature in Aristotle to the Greek Fathers. He writes that “the Aristotelian principle according to which each ‘nature’ (*physis*) has an ‘energy’ (*energeia*)—i.e., an existentially perceivable manifestation—provides the terminological background for the patristic concept of ‘energy.’”²¹ Therefore, God, in His very essence, is only known through the ways He manifests Himself; His essence itself cannot be known directly. Furthermore, Meyendorff goes beyond the Aristotelian idea of nature-energy. The energy of God is not just some sort of perceivable manifestation

18. Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 72–74.

19. Michael J. Loux, “Essentialism,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 281.

20. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 185.

21. *Ibid.*

that passively tends to manifest, but God's energy is action that takes place through persons (Greek *hypostases*).²² The *hypostases* are, of course, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Palamas and the Hesychast Issue

Much of modern Orthodoxy apophatic theology can be traced back to Gregory of Palamas; Aristotle Papanikolaou states that "Palamas's thought is characterized as the culmination of Eastern patristic thought"; he is the central to what is called a *neo-palamite synthesis*.²³ In *God For Us*, LaCugna devotes an entire chapter to a critique of Palamas' apophaticism. Before moving on to her critique, we shall briefly examine Palamas's idea.

Palamas was a monk of Mount Athos, Greece.²⁴ He and his colleagues were called "hesychasts" because of their manner of prayer, which involved silence and contemplation.²⁵ The Calabrian philosopher Barlaam accused the hesychasts of claiming to have seen "the divine light itself; [the hesychasts'] visions, [Barlaam] said, were at best visions of a God-centered physical light, and at worst demonic hallucinations."²⁶ Against these accusations arose Gregory's discourse on the divine essence-energy distinction.

Gregory begins his defense by connecting himself with the patristic and theological tradition before him: with Maximus, who spoke of the infinite transcendence of God; and with Basil, Gregory of

22. *Ibid.*, 185-186.

23. Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Reasonable Faith and a Trinitarian Logic," in *Restoring Faith in Reason*, eds. Laurence Paul Hemmings and Susan Frank Parsons (London, UK: SCM Press, 2002), 239.

24. LaCugna, 181; Meyendorff, 76.

25. LaCugna, 181.

26. Meyendorff, "The Holy Trinity in Palamite Theology," in *Trinitarian Theology East and West*, by Michael A. Fahey and John Meyendorff (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1979), 30.

Nyssa, and other Fathers who held to the idea that energy communicates essence.²⁷ Palamas proceeds to establish himself with the patristic tradition: “Moreover, the Holy Fathers affirm unanimously that it is impossible to find a name to manifest the nature of the uncreated Trinity, but that the names belong to the energies.”²⁸

Palamas asserts that the energies are not the essence itself. “But since God,” he writes, “is entirely present in each of the divine energies, we name Him from each of them, although it is clear that He transcends all of them.”²⁹ The evident conclusion is that essence that transcends its energies requires a distinction between the two. Alluding to the popular analogy of the sun and its rays as a way to illustrate the essence-energy distinction, Gregory the Palamite establishes that the energies can be participated in, although the essence cannot be.³⁰ Gregory does not draw the analogy out, but the idea apparently was that one can only experience the rays of the sun—to experience the sun itself would be impossible.

For Barlaam, a central issue was whether the energies were created or uncreated. He argues for that these were created energies—anything other than God’s essence is created.³¹ In Barlaam’s view, God’s energies cannot be seen unless they are created.³² At this point, it appears that Barlaam is disagreeing with Gregory on that basis that Gregory’s view does not fit his own. Barlaam apparently advances no solid reasons defending his view that only the divine essence is uncreated, and all energies are created.

LaCugna on Gregory of Palamas

27. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 95.

28. *Ibid.*, 97.

29. *Ibid.* 95–96.

30. *Ibid.*, 97–98.

31. *Ibid.*, 104.

32. *Ibid.*, 106.

Stanley Grenz perceives the late Catherine Mowry LaCugna as a significant thinker and a key player to the revival of Trinitarian thought.³³ What makes her interesting is that she, as a Western theologian, adapted Capaddocian theology (and seemingly Eastern theology³⁴ by implication) in her articulation of the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity on the life of a Christian.

LaCugna's Critique of Palamism

LaCugna considers, as two problems with Palamas's essence-energy distinction, the question of whether the energies are distinct ontologically or epistemologically.³⁵ Concerning the latter, she reasons that "if the distinction is epistemological only, there cannot be a real deification of the human being"—knowledge of God would not result in union with God.³⁶ Orthodox theologians, like Meyendorff, affirm that the essence and energy are ontologically distinct but not epistemologically.³⁷ For LaCugna, this distinction is problematic; her argument concerning an ontological distinction concludes with the claim that Palamism posits "two gods."³⁸ This conclusion appears to be short on force, for it evidently ignores that the word is "distinct" and not "separate." If Palamas posited that the energy and essence are separate—that is, that God in His transcendence is able to act in a completely disjointed way from the acts perceived in His energies—then the allegation for ditheism is strong. LaCugna only appeal is to the perspective of Aristotelian philosophy³⁹—something that the Orthodox choose not to be bound.⁴⁰

5. 33. Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004),

34. *Ibid.*, 147.

35. LaCugna, 188.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 186.

38. *Ibid.*, 189.

39. *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the challenges that LaCugna put forth against Palamism are not to be ignored. First, she wonders whether Gregory does stand in solidarity with the Fathers. While she does not prove that Gregory necessarily lacks patristic support, she legitimately questions if the Cappadocians support his line of thought without uncertainty. She does this by pointing out the context of the Cappadocians' essence-energy distinction in their response to Eunomius, and that their use of words might not correspond to that of Palamas.

Second, LaCugna points out that to say that one can know God's essence is unknowable is self-defeating.⁴¹ This is similar to the declaration that *one knows that truth cannot be known*.

Third, she contends for “the assertion that the *ousia* of God exists trihypostatically.” It would seem that if the energies are what commune with creation, then the energies—and not the divine persons themselves—would what are be expressed in the economy of the Trinity.⁴² Such a concept would be difficult to reconcile with a text like John 1:1 that speaks of the *Logos* becoming flesh. If the energy, and not the person, was manifested in the incarnation, then a *what* and not a *who* became human. These are formidable objections and are worthy of exploration by both Eastern and Western theologians. To balance the perspective on Gregory Palamas, we now turn to Vladimir Lossky, a champion of Palamite theology.

Lossky on the Palamite Synthesis

Lossky is perhaps the greatest influence on the continuation of Palamism into Orthodox thought. Papanikolaou says of him, “It would be difficult to locate an Orthodox theologian that does not rely on

40. Meyendorff, 185–187.

41. LaCugna, 190.

42. *Ibid.*, 192–193.

the thought of Gregory Palamas as a basis for expressing a contemporary Orthodox theology.”⁴³ Lossky, in a great portion of his writings, expounds on Gregory’s concept of the divine energy.

The significance of the distinction between essence and energy has to do with deification—union with God. For one to unite with the divine essence would be to make that person “God by nature.”⁴⁴ However, because of the union between humanity and divinity in Christ, a believer must participate in the divine nature. This participation occurs through the divine energies.⁴⁵

Dom Illtyd Trethowan believes that this distinction is “disastrous. For it destroys God’s unity.”⁴⁶ Lossky holds that “this distinction between essence and energies does not introduce any sort of division with the divine being.”⁴⁷ An essence-energy distinction does not necessitate a compromise of the simplicity of God’s divine essence. If such a compromise were true, then valid would the charge seem that the classical Trinitarian formulation itself would compromise divine simplicity—but it does not, and Lossky argues that neither does the distinction between energy and essence.⁴⁸ The distinction, no doubt, introduces more complexity into the describing of the mystery of God, but an accusation itself does not establish that essence-energy distinction equals compromise of divine simplicity. Furthermore, Lossky states that the energies are God Himself.⁴⁹ Thus, if the Christian is united with God through His energies, it can be said that one is genuinely united with God, albeit not with God’s very essence. Perhaps this is a viable solution to the assertion that a real distinction would indicate two gods.

43. Papanikolaou, “Reasonable Faith,” 239.

44. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 70.

45. Ibid.; Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 2003): 359.

46. Dom Illtyd Trethowan, “Lossky on Mystical Theology,” *The Downside Review* 92, no. 309 (October 1974): 243.

47. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 127.

48. See Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 76–79.

49. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 72.

Lossky further makes a distinction between essence, energy, and persons. Concerning Lossky's thought on the divine energies and persons, Morrel writes, "The uncreated energies are distinguished from the three Divine Hypostases; yet God is not composite."⁵⁰ Whether this is feasible is uncertain. If a distinction exists between persons and energies, and a person is incarnated, and this person genuinely reveals the other persons and may be known, then what real purpose do the energies serve? Lossky's approach to such a question would be to draw from Palamas's idea that the divine light, that is, His glory, occurs "according to His energy."⁵¹ This is the light that was manifested at the Transfiguration, as well as "in the theophanies of the Old Testament as the glory of God."⁵² The light was always with Christ.

A safe deduction that may be drawn from Lossky's position, then, would be to say that although the divine person and the divine energy are distinct, the person always has his energy; and because the energy is what can be perceived as the person discloses himself, to experience the energy is to experience the person. Yet, the distinction remains so as to safeguard the essence of God, although the essence is experienced indirectly through the energies that the persons possess and manifest.

Conclusion

Knowing God is a vital to anyone who professes to be Christian. The fullness of Christian life on this earth is by participation in the life of the Triune God. Eastern Orthodoxy has attempted to wrestle with how one can know, experience, and unite with the radically transcendent God. The attempt is worthwhile and is rewarding and at the same time leaves one wanting more. The essence-energy distinction is innovative, but the effort to describe the Infinite with finite words has its challenges. Yet,

50. Morrel, 38.

51. Lossky, *In the Image*, 58.

52. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

from the study of this effort, we can draw three principles for (1) those who might undertake and continue to develop such study, and (2) for all believers in this and future generations.

First, one must appreciate the church fathers and theologians of the past. This appreciation was certainly evident in Gregory Palamas. While not mentioned in this paper, Lossky was very careful to trace Palamas's (and his own) doctrines to the Cappadocians and other important ancient thinkers.⁵³ The church of today cannot make a break from the church that has gone before us. We must stand in solidarity with them.

Second, one must appreciate those who disagree. In the case of Gregory and Barlaam, the continued correspondence (however rough it might have gotten) resulted in the clarification and/or reestablishment of a central Orthodox doctrine, a doctrine believed to be in line with the Eastern Fathers. Had the Gregory-Barlaam debate never have taken place, the divine energy-essence distinction might have faded away. Assuming that Palamas's formulations were a valid continuation of the Fathers, a significant Orthodox, and thereby patristic, doctrine once again has become a priority for many Christian minds.

Returning to the recent debates, LaCugna raised some formidable objections. Without objections like those, doctrinal development will never take place. Some doctrines cannot be changed (Trinity and classical Christology, for example), but all doctrine must be communicated in a way understandable to a generation far removed from the church of the past, and this may require some development—to render the doctrine in the recipient language at the very least. Theologically, Lossky's contributions will be a factor in elucidating the Orthodox position in the future.

Finally, one must guard the mystery of God. The paradox that God is transcendent and immanent must be held in tension. The parameters have been set as to what we can or cannot say about God. We must therefore guard against overly philosophizing or speculating on the nature of God. We

53. See Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 67–90.

must accept that the essence of God is a mystery, and what we can know about Him will never be exhausted. Yet, despite the mysterious unknowable element, we continue to wrestle with knowing God—and rightly so! The important fact is that we do know Him when we encounter the Son Jesus Christ.

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* This was used in footnote 11, but not as a direct source.

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