

God in Trinity

Chapter 3 of *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*

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The apophaticism characteristic of the theological thought of the Eastern Church is not an impersonal mysticism, an experience of the absolute divine nothingness in which both the human person and God as person are swallowed up.

The goal to which apophatic theology leads— if, indeed, we may speak of goal or ending when, as here, it is a question of an ascent towards the infinite; this infinite goal is not a nature or an essence, nor is it a person; it is something which transcends all notion both of nature and of person: it is the Trinity.

St. Gregory Nazianzen, who is sometimes called the minstrel of the Holy Trinity, tells us in one of his theological poems: ‘From the day whereon I renounced the things of the world to consecrate my soul to luminous and heavenly contemplation, when the supreme intelligence carried me hence to set me down far from all that pertains to the flesh, to hide me in the secret places of the heavenly tabernacle; from that day my eyes have been blinded by the light of the Trinity, whose brightness surpasses all that the mind can conceive; for from a throne high exalted the Trinity pours upon all, the ineffable radiance common to the Three. This is the source of all that is here below, separated by time from the things on high... From that day forth I was dead to the world and the world was dead to me.¹ At the close of his life he longs to be ‘there where

my Trinity is, and the gathered brightness of Its splendour.... Trinity, whose dim shadows exalt me'.²

If the very foundation of created being is change, the transition from non-being to being, if the creature is contingent by nature, the Trinity is an absolute stability. One would say, an absolute necessity of perfect being: and yet the idea of necessity is not proper to the Trinity, for It transcends the antinomy of what is necessary, and the contingent; entirely personal and entirely nature; liberty and necessity are one, or, rather, can have no place in God. There is no dependence in relation to created being on the part of the Trinity; no determination of what is called 'the eternal procession of the divine persons' by the act of the creation of the world. Even though the created order did not exist, God would still be Trinity— Father, Son and Holy Ghost— for creation is an act of will: the procession of the persons is an act 'according to nature' (*kata physin*).³ There is no interior process in the Godhead; no 'dialectic' of the three persons; no becoming; no 'tragedy in the Absolute', which might necessitate the trinitarian development of the divine being in order-that it be surmounted or resolved. These conceptions, proper to the romantic tradition of nineteenth century German philosophy, are wholly foreign to the dogma of the Trinity. If we speak of processions, of acts, or of inner determinations, these expressions— involving, as they do, the ideas of time, becoming and intention— only show to what extent our language, indeed our thought, is poor and deficient before the primordial mystery of revelation. Again we are forced to appeal to apophatic theology in order to rid ourselves of concepts proper to human thought, transforming them into steps

by which we may ascend to the contemplation of a reality which the created intelligence cannot contain.

It is in such a spirit as this that St. Gregory Nazianzen speaks in his oration on baptism: ‘No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three, I think of Him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.⁴ 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. How can the antinomy of unity and trinity be contained in an image? How can this mystery be grasped save by the aid of an idea— be it that of movement or of development— which is inadmissible? Nazianzen’s conscious adoption of the language of Plotinus can delude only those unimaginative and pedestrian souls who are incapable of rising above rational concepts: those who ransack the thought of the Fathers for traces of ‘Platonism’ or ‘Aristotelianism’. St. Gregory speaks to the philosophers as a philosopher, that he may win the philosopher to the contemplation of the Trinity. ‘The monad is set in motion in virtue of its richness; the dyad is surpassed (for the deity is above matter and form); the triad contains itself in perfection, for it is the first which surpasses the composition of the dyad. Thus, the Godhead does not dwell within bounds, nor does it spread itself indefinitely. The one would be without honour, the other would be contrary to order. The

one would be wholly Judaic, the other Hellenistic and polytheistic.⁵ One gains a glimpse of the mystery of the number, three; the deity is neither one nor many; its perfection goes beyond the multiplicity of which duality is the root (we recall the interminable dyads of the gnostics, and the dualism of the Platonists), and expresses itself in the Trinity. The term ‘expresses itself’ is improper, for the divinity has no need to manifest its perfection, either to itself or to others. It is the Trinity, and this fact can be deduced from no principle nor explained by any sufficient reason, for there are neither principles nor causes anterior to the Trinity.

Trias: ‘name which unites things united by nature, and never allows those which are inseparable to be scattered by a number which separates,’ says St. Gregory Nazianzen.⁶ Two is the number which separates, three the number which transcends all separation: the one and the many find themselves gathered and circumscribed in the Trinity. ‘When I say *God*, I mean Father, Son and Holy Ghost; for Godhead is neither diffused beyond these, so as to introduce a multitude of gods, nor yet bounded by a smaller compass than these, so as to condemn us for a poverty-stricken conception of deity, either Judaizing to save the monarchy, or falling into Hellenism by the multitude of our gods.’⁷ St. Gregory Nazianzen is not seeking to vindicate the trinity of persons before the human reason: he simply shows the insufficiency of any number other than three. But we may ask whether the idea of number can be applied to God; whether we do not thus submit the divinity to an exterior determination, to a form proper to our understanding— that of the number, three. To this objection St. Basil replies as follows: ‘we do not count by addition, passing from the one to the many by increase;

we do not say: one, two, three, or first, second and third. *'For I am God, the first, and I am the last.'*⁸ Now we have never, even to the present time, heard of a second God; but adoring God of God, confessing the individuality of the hypostases, we dwell in the monarchy without dividing the theology into fragments.⁹ In other words, there is no question here of a material number which serves for calculation and is in no wise applicable in the spiritual sphere, where there is no quantitative increase. The threefold number is not, as we commonly understand it, a quantity; when it relates to the indivisibly united divine hypostases, the 'sum' of which is always the unity, $3=1$, it expresses the ineffable order within the Godhead.

The contemplation of this absolute perfection, of this divine plenitude which is the Trinity— God who is personal and who is not a person confined in his own self the very thought, the mere 'pale shade of the Trinity', lifts the human soul beyond the world of being, changing and confused, in bestowing upon it this stability in the midst of passions; this serenity, or *apatheia* which is the beginning of deification. For the creature, subject to change by nature, can by grace attain to the state of eternal stability; can partake of infinite life in the light of the Trinity.

This is why the Church has defended so vehemently the mystery of the Holy Trinity against the natural tendencies of the human mind 'which strive to suppress it by reducing the Trinity to unity, in making it an essence of the philosophers with three modes of manifestation (the modalism of Sabellius), or even by dividing it into three distinct beings, as did Arius.

The Church has expressed by the *homoousios* the

consubstantiality of the Three, the mysterious identity of the monad and of the triad; identity of the one nature and distinction of the three hypostases. It is interesting to note that the expression *to homoousion einai* is found in Plotinus.¹⁰ The trinity of Plotinus comprises three consubstantial hypostases: the One, the Intelligence, and the Soul of the world. Their consubstantiality does not rise to the trinitarian antinomy of Christian dogma: it appears as a descending hierarchy and realizes itself through the ceaseless flow of the hypostases which pass the one into the other, reciprocally reflecting each other. This demonstrates once again the unsoundness of the method of those historians who would express the thought of the Fathers of the Church by explaining the terms they use in the light of Hellenistic philosophy. Revelation sets an abyss between the truth which it declares and the truths which can be discovered by philosophical speculation. If human thought guided by the instinct for truth— which is faith, though confused and uncertain— could, apart from Christianity, grope its way towards certain notions which approximated to the Trinity, the mystery of God-in-Trinity remained inscrutable to it. A ‘change of spirit’ was needed— a *metanoia*, which also means ‘penitence’, like the penitence of Job when he found himself face to face with God: ‘I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’¹¹ The mystery of the Trinity only becomes accessible to that ignorance which rises above all that can be contained within the concepts of the philosophers. Yet this *ignorantia*, not only *docta* but charitable also, re-descends again upon these concepts that it may mould them; that it may transform the expressions

of human wisdom into the instruments of that Wisdom of God which is to the Greeks foolishness.

It required the superhuman efforts of an Athanasius of Alexandria, of a Basil, of a Gregory Nazianzen and of many others, to purify the concepts of Hellenistic thought, to break down the watertight bulkheads by the introduction of a Christian apophaticism which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity. It was a question of finding a distinction of terms which should express the unity of, and the differentiation within, the Godhead, without giving the pre-eminence either to the one or to the other; that thought might not fall into the error of a Sabellian unitarianism or a pagan tritheism. The Fathers of the fourth century— trinitarian century *par excellence*—availed themselves by preference of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* to lead the intellect towards the mystery of the Trinity. The term *ousia* is frequently employed by Aristotle, who defines it as follows: ‘That is principally, primarily and properly called *ousia* which is stated of no subject and which is in no subject— for example, this man, or this horse. We call “second ousias” (*deuterai ousiai*) those species wherein the “first ousias” exist with their corresponding description: thus, “this man” is specifically man and generically animal. Man and animal, then, are called “second ousias”.’¹² In other words, ‘first ousias’ are individual subsistences, the individual subsisting; ‘second ousias’ essences, in the realistic sense of the word. *Hypostasis*, without having the value of a philosophical term, signifies in current terminology that which really subsists, subsistence (from the verb *hyphistamai*, to subsist). St. John Damascene gives the following definition of the conceptual value of the two terms in his Dialectic: *ousia* is a thing that exists by itself, and which has need of nothing else for its consistency. Again, *ousia* is all that *subsists* by

itself and which has not its being in another. It is thus that which is not for another, that which does not have its existence in another, that which has no need of another for its consistency, but is in itself and in which the accident has its existence.... The term *hypostasis* has two meanings. Sometimes it means simply existence. From this definition it follows that *ousia* and *hypostasis* are the same thing. Hence certain of the holy fathers have said: natures, or hypostases. Sometimes it denotes that which exists by itself and in its own consistency; from which meaning it comes that it denotes the individual, differing numerically from every other— Peter, Paul, this particular horse.¹³ The two terms would thus appear to be more or less synonymous; *ousia* meaning an individual substance, while being capable at the same time of denoting the essence common to many individuals; *hypostasis*, on the other hand, meaning existence in general, but capable also of application to individual substances. According to the testimony of Theodoret of Cyrus: ‘for profane wisdom there is no difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. For *ousia* means that which is, and *hypostasis* that which subsists. But according to the teaching of the fathers, there is between *ousia* and *hypostasis* the same difference as between common and particular.’¹⁴ The genius of the Fathers made use of the two synonyms to distinguish in God that which is common— *ousia*, substance or essence— from that which is particular— *hypostasis* or person.

This latter expression, *persona*, *prosopon*, which was widely adopted especially in the West, at first occasioned lively disputes in Eastern Christendom. In reality, this word far from having its modern sense of person (human personality, for example), denoted rather the outward aspect of the individual— the appearance, visage, mask; or the character assumed by an actor. St. Basil saw in this

term, as applied to trinitarian doctrine, a tendency peculiar to western thought: a tendency which had already shown itself in Sabellianism in making of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost no more than three modalities of a unique substance. In the West, on the other hand, the term hypostasis (which was translated by *substantia*), was regarded as an expression of tritheism and even of Arianism. These misunderstandings were nevertheless dispelled. The term hypostasis, as expressing the notion of person in the concrete sense, passed to the West. The term *persona*, or *prosopon*, was received and suitably interpreted in the East. Thus, in the freeing of men's minds from natural limitations due to differences of mentality and culture, the catholicity of the Church was made manifest. Though the Latins might express the mystery of the Trinity by starting from one essence in order to arrive at the three persons; though the Greeks might prefer the concrete as their starting point (that is to say, the three hypostases), seeing in them the one nature; it was always the same dogma of the Trinity that was confessed by the whole of Christendom before the separation. St. Gregory Nazianzen thus brings together the two methods of approach: 'When I speak of God you must be illumined at once by one flash of light and by three. Three in Properties, or Hypostases, or Persons, if any prefer so to call them, for we will not quarrel about names so long as the syllables amount to the same meaning; but One in respect of the *ousia*, that is, the Godhead. For they are divided indivisibly, if I may so say; and they are conjoined dividedly. For the Godhead is one in three, and the three are one, in whom the Godhead is, or, to speak more accurately, Who are the Godhead.'¹⁵ And in another oration he thus sums up the distinction between the hypostatic characteristics: 'The very fact of being unbegotten, or begotten, or proceeding, has given the name of Father to the First, of the Son to

the Second, and to the Third, Him of whom we are speaking, of the Holy Ghost, that the distinction of the Three Hypostases may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead. For neither is the Son Father, for the Father is One, but He is what the Father is; nor is the Spirit Son because He is of God, for the Only-begotten is One, but He is what the Son is. The Three are One in Godhead, and the One Three in properties; so that neither is the Unity a Sabellian one, nor does the Trinity countenance the present evil division.’ (i.e. Arianism).¹⁶

Purged of its Aristotelian content, the theological notion of hypostasis in the thought of the eastern Fathers means not so much *individual* as *person*, in the modern sense of this word. Indeed, our ideas of human personality, of that *personal* quality which makes every human being unique, to be expressed only in terms of itself: this idea of *person* comes to us from Christian theology. The philosophy of antiquity knew only human individuals. The human person cannot be expressed in concepts. It eludes all rational definitions, indeed all description, for all the properties whereby it could be characterized can be met with in other individuals. Personality can only be grasped in this life by a direct intuition; it can only be expressed in a work of art. When we say ‘this is by Mozart’, or ‘this is by Rembrandt’, we are in both cases dealing with a personal world which has no equivalent anywhere. And yet human persons, or hypostases, are isolated and, in the words of St. John Damascene, ‘do not exist the one within the other’; while, ‘in the Holy Trinity it is quite the reverse... the hypostases dwell in one another.’¹⁷ The works of human persons are distinct. Not so those of the divine Persons; for the Three, having but one nature, have but a single will, a single power, a single operation. To quote St. John Damascene again: ‘The persons are

made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other, and they have their being in each other (*ten en allelais perichoresin echousi*) without any coalescence or commingling. Nor do the Son and Spirit stand apart, nor are they sundered in essence as in the heresy of Arius. For, to put it concisely, the Godhead is undivided; and it is just like three suns cleaving to each other without separation, and giving out light mingled and conjoined into one.¹⁸ ‘Each one of the persons contains the unity by this relation to the others no less than by this relation to Himself.’¹⁹

Indeed, each of the three hypostases contains the unity, the one nature, after the manner proper to it, and which, in distinguishing it from the other two persons, recalls at the same time the indissoluble bond uniting the Three. ‘For in their hypostatic or personal properties alone’, says Damascene— ‘the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession— do the three divine hypostases differ from each other, being indivisibly divided, not by essence but by the distinguishing mark of their proper and peculiar hypostasis.’²⁰ ‘The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one in all respects save those of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession.’²¹

The only characteristic of the hypostases which we can state to be exclusively proper to each, and which is never found in the others, by reason of their consubstantiality, is thus the relation of origin. Nevertheless, this relation must be understood in an apophatic sense. It is above all a negation, showing us that the Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; that the Son is neither the Father nor the Spirit; that the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Otherwise to regard it would be to submit the Trinity to a category of Aristotelian logic, that of relation. Understood apophatically, the relation of origin describes

the difference but nevertheless does not indicate the manner of the divine processions. ‘The mode of generation and the mode of procession are incomprehensible,’ says St. John Damascene. ‘We have learned that there is a difference between generation and procession, but the nature of the difference we in no wise understand.’²² St. Gregory Nazianzen had already been forced to reject the attempts made to define the mode of the divine procession. ‘You ask,’ he says, ‘what is the procession of the Holy Spirit? Do you tell me first what is the unbegottenness of the Father, and I will then explain to you the physiology of the generation of the Son, and the procession of the Spirit, and we shall both of us be stricken with madness for prying into the mystery of God.’²³ ‘You hear that there is generation? Do not waste your time in seeking after the how. You hear that the Spirit proceeds from the Father? Do not busy yourself about the how.’²⁴ Indeed, if the relations of origin— to be unbegotten, begotten and proceeding which cause us to distinguish the three hypostases, lead our thought to the sole source of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to the *pegaia theotes*, to the Father, Source of Divinity,²⁵ they do not establish a separate relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit. These two persons are distinguished by the different mode of their origin: the Son is begotten, the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father. This is sufficient to distinguish them.

The reaction of St. Gregory Nazianzen shows that trinitarian speculation, not content with the formula of the procession of the Holy Spirit *dia hyiou*, ‘through the Son’, or ‘in connexion with the Son’ (an expression which is found in the Fathers and which usually refers to the mission of the Holy Spirit in the world through the

mediation of the Son), was seeking to establish a relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit as to their hypostatic origins. This relationship between the two persons who take their origin from the Father was established by the western doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit *ab utroque*, that is to say from the two persons at once; from the Father and from the Son. The *filioque* was the primordial cause, the only dogmatic cause, of the breach between East and West. The other doctrinal disputes were but its consequences. In order to understand what the East desired to safeguard in protesting against the western formula it will suffice to compare the two trinitarian conceptions which confronted each other about the middle of the ninth century.

As we have already observed, in expounding the dogma of the Trinity, western thought most frequently took as its starting point the one nature, and thence passed to the consideration of the three persons, while the Greeks followed the opposite course— from the three persons to the one nature. St. Basil preferred this latter way, which in conformity to Holy Scripture and to the baptismal formula which names the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, starts from the concrete. Human thought does not run the risk of going astray if it passes from the consideration of the three persons to that of the common nature. Nevertheless, the two ways were both equally legitimate so long as the first did not attribute to the essence a supremacy over the three persons, nor the second to the three persons a supremacy over the common nature. In fact, as we have seen, the Fathers made use of two synonyms (*ousia* and *hypostasis*) to establish the distinction between the nature and the persons, without putting the emphasis upon either. Where one spoke of the persons (or person) one spoke at the same time of the nature, and vice versa. The nature is inconceivable apart from the persons or as anterior to the three persons, even

in the logical order. If the balance of this antinomy between nature and persons, absolutely different and absolutely identical at the same time, is upset, there will be in the one case a tendency towards a Sabellian unitarianism (the God-essence of the philosophers), or else towards tritheism. The Greeks saw in the formula of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son a tendency to stress the unity of nature at the expense of the real distinction between the persons. The relationships of origin which do not bring the Son and the Spirit back directly to the unique source, to the Father— the one as begotten, the other as proceeding—become a system of relationships within the one essence: something logically posterior to the essence. Indeed, according to the western conception the Father and the Son cause the Holy Spirit to proceed, inasmuch as they represent the one nature; while the Holy Spirit, who, for western theologians, becomes ‘the bond between the Father and the Son’, stands for a natural unity between the first two persons. The hypostatic characteristics (paternity, generation, procession), find them selves more or less swallowed up in the nature or essence which, differentiated by relationships— to the Son as Father, to the Holy Spirit as Father and Son—becomes the principle of unity within the Trinity. The relationships, instead of being characteristics of the hypostases, are identified with them. As St. Thomas was later to write: ‘*Persona est relatio*’,²⁶ inner relationship of the essence which it diversifies. It can scarcely be denied that there is a difference between this trinitarian conception and that of Gregory Nazianzen with his ‘Thrice-repeated Holy, meeting in one ascription of the title Lord and God.’²⁷ As Father de Regnon very justly observes: ‘Latin

philosophy first considers the nature in itself and proceeds to the agent; Greek philosophy first considers the agent and afterwards passes through it to find the nature. The Latins think of personality as a mode of nature; the Greeks think of nature as the content of the person.²⁸ The Greek Fathers always maintained* that the principle of unity in the Trinity is the person of the Father. As Principle of the other two persons, the Father is at the same time the Source of the relations whence the hypostases receive their distinctive characteristics. In causing the persons to proceed, he lays down their relations of origin— generation and procession— in regard to the unique principle of Godhead. This is why the East has always opposed the formula of *filioque* which seems to impair the monarchy of the Father: either one is forced to destroy the unity by acknowledging two principles of Godhead, or one must ground the unity primarily on the common nature, which thus overshadows the persons and transforms them into relations within the unity of the essence. For the West, the relations diversified the primordial unity. For the East, they signified at one and the same time the diversity and the unity, because they had reference to the Father who is principle, as well as recapitulation (*sugkephalaiosis*), of the Trinity. It is in this sense that St. Athanasius understands the saying of St. Dionysius of Alexandria: ‘We extend the monad indivisibly into the triad, and conversely we *recapitulate* the triad without diminution into the monad.’²⁹ Elsewhere he declares: ‘There is a single principle of the Godhead, whence there is strictly a monarchy.’³⁰ ‘A single God because a single Father’, according to the saying of the Greek Fathers. The persons and the nature are ‘so to say, given at the same time, without the one being logically

prior to the other. The Father— *pegaia theotes*, source of all divinity within the Trinity— brings forth the Son and the Holy Spirit in conferring upon them His nature, which remains one and indivisible, identical in itself in the Three. For the Greek Fathers, to confess the unity of the nature is to recognize the Father as unique Source of the persons who receive from Him this same nature. ‘In my opinion,’ says St. Gregory Nazianzen, ‘one safeguards one only God in referring the Son and the Spirit to a single Principle, neither compounding nor confounding them; and in affirming the identity of substance and what I will call the unique and like motion and will of the Godhead.’³¹ ‘To us there is one God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons.... When, then, we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchy, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who timelessly and with equal glory have their being from the First Cause— there are Three whom we worship.’³² St. Gregory Nazianzen here brings the Godhead and the Person of the Father so closely together that he might be thought to confound them. He clarifies his thought in another passage: ‘The Three have one Nature— God. And the union (*henosis*) is the Father, from whom and to whom the order of Persons runs its course, not so as to be confounded, but so as to be possessed, without distinction of time, of will, or of power.’³³ St. John Damascene expresses the same thought with that doctrinal precision which is peculiar to him. ‘The Father derives from Himself His being, nor does He derive a single quality from another. Rather He is Himself the beginning and cause of the existence of all things both as

to their nature and mode of being. All then that the Son and the Spirit have is from the Father, even their very being; and unless the Father is, neither the Son nor the Spirit is. And unless the Father possesses a certain attribute, neither the Son nor the Spirit possesses it: and through the Father, that is, because of the Father's existence, the Son and the Spirit exist.... When, then, we turn our eyes to the Godhead, and the first cause, and the sovereignty... what is seen by us is unity. But when we look to those things in which the Godhead is, or, to put it more accurately, which are the Godhead, and those things which are in it through the first cause . . . that is to say, the hypostases of the Son and the Spirit, it seems to us a Trinity that we adore.³⁴ It is the Father who distinguishes the hypostases 'in an eternal movement of love' (*achronos kai agapetikos*), according to an expression of St. Maximus.³⁵ He confers His one nature upon the Son and upon the Holy Spirit alike, in whom it remains one and undivided, not distributed, while being differently conferred; for the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father is not identical with the generation of the Son by the same Father. Manifested by the Son and with the Son, the Holy Spirit has His being as divine person in proceeding from the Father, as is plainly stated by St. Basil: 'For of the Father is the Son, by Whom are all things and with whom the Holy Spirit is always thought of together inseparably. For it is impossible to obtain any comprehension of the Son without first being enlightened by the Spirit. Since, then, the Holy Spirit, from whom springs the whole abundance of good things distributed to the creation, is linked on to the Son, and with Him is apprehended without any discontinuity, He has His being attached to the Father, from whom He proceeds.

This is the distinguishing note characteristic of His hypostasis— that He is made known after the Son and together with Him, and takes His subsistence from the Father. As for the Son, who through Himself and with Himself makes known the Spirit who proceeds from the Father, and who shines forth alone only-begottenly from the unbegotten light, He has nothing in common with the Father or the Holy Spirit as to the marks whereby He is distinguished, but alone is distinguished by the notes just mentioned. But God who is above all, alone has one exceptional mark of His hypostasis— that He is Father, and has His subsistence from no cause; and by this note again He is Himself peculiarly recognized.³⁶

St. John Damascene expresses himself with no less precision in distinguishing the persons of the Holy Trinity without submitting them to the category of relation: ‘It should be understood’, he says, ‘that we do not speak of the Father as derived from anyone, but we speak of Him as the Father of the Son. We speak of the Son neither as Cause (*aition*) nor Father, but we speak of Him, both as from the Father and as the Son of the Father. And we speak likewise of the Holy Spirit as from the Father, and call Him the Spirit of the Father. We do not speak of the Spirit as from the Son, but yet we call Him the Spirit of the Son (*ek tou hyiou de to pneuma ou legomen, pneuma de hyiou onomazomen*).³⁷

The Word and the Spirit, two rays of the same sun, or rather ‘two new suns’,³⁸ are inseparable in their showing forth of the Father and are yet ineffably distinct, as two persons proceeding from the same Father. If, in conformity to the Latin formula, we introduce here a new relation of origin, making the Holy Spirit to proceed from the

Father and from the Son; the monarchy of the Father, this personal relation creating the unity at the same time as the trinity, gives place to another conception— that of the one substance in which the relations intervene to establish the distinction of persons, and in which the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit is no more than a reciprocal bond between the Father and the Son. Once the different emphasis of the two trinitarian doctrines has been perceived, it will be understood why the East has always defended the ineffable, apophatic character of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, unique source of the persons, against a more rational doctrine which, in making of the Father and the Son a common principle of the Holy Spirit, places the common nature above the persons; a doctrine which tends to weaken the hypostases by confounding the persons of Father and Son in the natural act of spiration, and in making of the Holy Spirit a connection between the two.

In insisting upon the monarchy of the Father— unique source of Godhead and principle of the unity of the three— the eastern theologians were defending a conception of the Trinity which they considered to be more concrete, more personal, than that against which they contended. Nevertheless, we may ask, does not this triadology fall into the opposite excess: does it not place the persons before the nature? Such would be the case, for example, if the nature were given the character of a common revelation of the persons (as in the sophiology of Father Bulgakov, a modern Russian theologian whose teaching, like that of Origen, reveals the dangers of the eastern approach, or, rather, the snares into which the Russian thinker is prone to stumble).³⁹ But the Orthodox

tradition is as far from this eastern exaggeration as from its western antithesis. In fact, as we have seen, if the persons exist it is precisely because they have the one nature; their very procession consists in receiving their common nature from the Father. A further objection may seem to rest on surer ground: does not this monarchy of the Father savour of subordination? Does not this conception confer upon the Father, the one unique source, a certain pre-eminence as the divine person?

St. Gregory Nazianzen foresaw this difficulty: 'I should like', he says, 'to call the Father the greater, because from Him flow both the equality and the being of the equals ... but I am afraid to use the word Origin, lest I should make Him the Origin of inferiors, and thus insult Him by precedencies of honour. For the lowering of those who are from Him is no glory to the Source.'⁴⁰

'Godhead... neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite connaturality of Three Infinite Ones, each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three, one God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; the Three, one God because of the monarchy.'⁴¹

Thus, in formulating the dogma of the Trinity, the apophatic character of patristic thought was able while distinguishing between nature and hypostases to preserve their mysterious equivalence. In the words of St. Maximus, 'God is identically Monad and Triad'.⁴² This is the end of the endless way: the limit of the limitless ascent; the

Incomprehensibility reveals Himself in the very fact of His being incomprehensible, for his incomprehensibility is rooted in the fact that God is not only Nature but also Three Persons; the incomprehensible Nature is incomprehensible inasmuch as it is the Nature of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; God, incomprehensible because Trinity yet manifesting Himself as Trinity. Here apophaticism finds its fulfilment in the revelation of the Holy Trinity as primordial fact, ultimate reality, first datum which cannot be deduced, explained or discovered by way of any other truth; for there is nothing which is prior to it. Apophatic thought, renouncing every support, finds its support in God, whose incomprehensibility appears as Trinity. Here thought gains a stability which cannot be shaken; theology finds its foundation; ignorance passes into knowledge.

If one speaks of God it is always, for the Eastern Church, in the concrete: 'The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; the God of Jesus Christ.' It is always the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. When, on the contrary, the common nature assumes the first place in our conception of trinitarian dogma the religious reality of God in Trinity is inevitably obscured in some measure and gives place to a certain philosophy of essence.⁴³ Likewise, the idea of beatitude has acquired in the West a slightly intellectual emphasis, presenting itself in the guise of a vision of the essence of God. The personal relationship of man to the living God is no longer a relationship to the Trinity, but rather has as its object the person of Christ, who reveals to us the divine nature. Christian life and thought become christocentric, relying primarily upon the humanity of the incarnate Word; one might almost say that it is

this which becomes their anchor of salvation.⁴⁴ Indeed, in the doctrinal conditions peculiar to the West all properly theocentric speculation runs the risk of considering the nature before the persons and becoming a mysticism of 'the divine abyss', as in the *Gotttheit* of Meister Eckhart; of becoming an impersonal apophaticism of the divine nothingness prior to the Trinity. Thus by a paradoxical circuit we return through Christianity to the mysticism of the neo-platonists.

In the tradition of the Eastern Church there is no place for a theology, and even less for a mysticism, of the divine essence. The goal of Orthodox spirituality, the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven, is not the vision of the essence, but, above all, a participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity; the deified state of the co-heirs of the divine nature, gods created after the uncreated God, possessing by grace all that the Holy Trinity possesses by nature.

The Trinity is, for the Orthodox Church, the unshakeable foundation of all religious thought, of all piety, of all spiritual life, of all experience. It is the Trinity that we seek in seeking after God, when we search for the fullness of being, for the end and meaning of existence. Primordial revelation, itself the source of all revelation as of all being, the Holy Trinity presents itself to our religious consciousness as a fact the evidence for which can be grounded only upon itself. According to a modern Russian theologian, Father Florensky,⁴⁵ there is no other way in which human

thought may find perfect stability save that of accepting the trinitarian antinomy. If we reject the Trinity as the sole ground of all reality and of all thought, we are committed to a road that leads nowhere; we end in an aporia, in folly, in the disintegration of our being, in spiritual death. Between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice. This question is, indeed, crucial— in the literal sense of that word. The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought. The apophatic ascent is a mounting of calvary. This is the reason why no philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. This is the reason why the human spirit was able to receive the full revelation of the Godhead only after Christ on the cross had triumphed over death and over the abyss of hell. This, finally, is the reason why the revelation of the Trinity shines out in the Church as a purely religious gift, as the catholic truth above all other.

Notes

- 1 'Poemata de seipso I', P.G., XXXVII, 984-5.
- 2 Ibid., XI; P.G., XXXVII, 1165-6.
- 3 St. Athanasius of Alexandria, 'Contra Arianos', I, 18, P.G., XXVI, 49. St. John Damascene, 'De fide orthodoxa', I, 8, P.G., XCIV, 812-13.
- 4 'Oratio XL, 41', P.G., XXXVI, 417 BC.
- 5 'Oratio XXII, 8', P.G., XXXV, 1160 CD.
- 6 'Oratio XXIII, 10', P.G., XXXV, 1161 C.
- 7 'Oratio XLV, 4', P.G., XXXVI, 628 C.
- 8 Is. xlv, 6: *Ego [gar] theos protos, kai ego meta tauta*, in the LXX. 'I am the first and I am the last', in the AV.
- 9 'De Spiritu Sancto', cap. 45, P.G., XXXII, 149 B. Edited with French translation by Benoit Pruche, O.P., Paris, 1947 (Sources chretiennes), pp. 192-3.
- 10 *Ennead*, IV, 4, 28. It is a question of the passions of the soul having the same nature.
- 11 Job xlii, 5-6.
- 12 *Categories*, V.
- 13 'Pege gnoseos, 39 and 42', P.G., XCIV, 605 and 612.
- 14 P.G., LXXXIII, 33 AB.
- 15 'In sancta lumina, Oratio XXXIX, xi', P.G., XXXVI, 345 CD.
- 16 'Oratio XXXI (Theologica V), ix' P.G., XXXVI, 144 A.
- 17 'De Fide Orthodoxa, 1, 8', P.G., XCIV, 828-9.
- 18 Ibid., 829.
- 19 Ibid., 828 C.
- 20 Ibid., 821-4.
- 21 Ibid., 828 D.
- 22 Ibid., 820 A, 824 A.
- 23 'Oratio XXXI (Theologica V), 8', P.G., XXXVI, 141 B.
- 24 'Oratio XX, ii', P.G., XXXV, 1077 C.
- 25 The expression is that of Dionysius, D.N., 11, 7, P.G., III, 645 B.
- 26 *Summa theologica*, la, q. 129, a. 4.
- 27 'In Theophaniam, Oratio XXXVIII, 8', P.G., XXXVI, 320 BC. The reference is, of course, to the Triumphal Hymn: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts...'
- 28 'Etudes de Theologie positive sur la St. Trinite, I, 433.
- 29 'De sententiae Dionysii, 17', P.G., XXV, 505 A.
- 30 'Contra Arianos, Oratio IV, i', P.G., XXVI, 468 B.
- 31 'Oratio XX, 7', P.G., XXXV, 1073.
- 32 'Oratio XXXI (Theologica V), 14', P.G., XXXVI, 148D-149A.
- 33 'Oratio XLII', P.G., XXXVI, 476 B.
- 34 'De fide orth., 1, 8', P.G., XCIV, 821 C, 824 B, 829 B.
- 35 'Scholia in lib. de Diwin. nomin., II, 3. *henoseis te kai diakriseis*, P.G., IV, 221 A.
- 36 'Epist. XXXVIII, 4', P.G., XXXII, 329 C–332 A.
- 37 'De fide orth., I, 8', P.G., XCIV, 832 AB.
- 38 St. Gregory Nazianzen, 'Oratio XXXI, 32', P.G., XXXVI, 169 B.
- 39 Father Bulgakov regarded God as a 'person in three hypostases', who reveals himself in the *ousia*— Wisdom. See his *Agnus Dei* (in Russian), Ch. I. (French translation, *Du Verbe incarne*, Aubier, 1943, pp. 13-20.)
- 40 'In sanct. bapt. Oratio XL, 43', P.G., XXXVI, 419 B.
- 41 Ibid., 41, 417 B.
- 42 'Capita theologica et oeconomica 200, Cent. II, I', P.G., XC, 1125 A.
- 43 'It would seem that in our time the dogma of the divine Unity had, as it were, absorbed the dogma of the Trinity of which one only speaks as a memory.' (Th. de Regnon, *Etudes de theol. pos. sur la Sainte Trinite*, I, 365.)
- 44 To avoid excessive generalization it must be pointed out that Cistercian mysticism, for example, remains trinitarian in its inspiration. This is above all true of Guillaume de St. Thierry whose teaching is greatly influenced by that of the Greek Fathers. Following the line of eastern theology he tends to moderate the prevailing 'filioquism'. See J.-M. Dechanet, O.S.B., 'Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, l'homme et son oeuvre' (*Bibliothèque Medievale, Spirituels prescolastiques*, I), Bruges, 1942, pp. 103-10.
- 45 See the chapter devoted to the Trinity in *Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Moscow, 1911 (in Russian).