

The Reception of Palamas in the West Today: A Response to Norman Russell*

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I read the very interesting and well grounded paper by Norman Russell on my return from a conference of a group called Spiritual Directors Europe in Norway, so let me start with where I have come from. Among the group of mainly Western Christians who are engaged in accompanying people in retreats and in one to one conversations about their journey with God in life, I want to note one thing which may be important for the following theme. Several of us there have practiced for years some aspects of hesychasm, be it the Jesus prayer, a deepened awareness of the centre of our being and communication with God in the heart, the combination of breathing and attending to our heart beating as a way of giving ourselves to God and receiving the life of the Spirit without words and without images, or liberating freedom experienced in the relationship with a starets. A German Lutheran pastor, a Hungarian Jesuit, a Dutch beguine¹, and a Czech Hussite priest and theologian, each of us have received this

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1. The history of beguines goes back to the 12th and 13th century Netherlands, Belgium, parts of Germany and Northern France. They were a lay movement which started communities of life without common rule and without hierarchical structure. Beguines – and their male counterparts beghards - were women and men who dedicated their lives to God without taking specific religious vows. They shared property, manual work, a life of contemplation, acts of charity, a way of life which emphasized simplicity, chastity, and service to the needy. Some, like my friend, still exist in the Low Countries. For more information, see MC DONNELL ERNEST W., *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, Octagon Books, New York, 1969; VAN AERSCHOT SUZANNE and HEIRMAN MICHIEL, *Les béguinages de Flandre, un patrimoine mondial*, Racine, Virginia, 2001.

tradition by different trajectories, and most of us have tried to complement the spiritual experience and practice with learning about where it came from and about the theological tradition that has accompanied it. This would be the background from which I would try to respond to the lecture by Norman Russell.

I will start with looking at why the experiential approach to Palamas is, in my opinion, irreplaceable. Then I will move on to how the theological defence of the hesychast experience of God could be enriched by a critique of metaphysics, and finally, with this critique in place, in which sense the essence-energy distinction may remain a helpful one. In all three points I will be following the trajectories of hostility and reception of Palamas in 20th and 21st century Western theology that Russell so well presents.

1. Starting from experience

Russell's lecture is an excellent, precise and well grounded study of both positive and negative responses to Palamas in the 20th century European theology. Starting with Martin Jugie he helps us to see why neoscholasticism with its metaphysical order of mediating the divine despised the direct experience of the uncreated glory and the ontological participation in God advocated by Palamas. Against Jugie's interpretation, I can state that both of these aspects of Palamas's theological reflection on his hesychast experience have been dear to those Western Christians who first passed on to me some of the hesychast practices. Theologically, they found Palamas consistent and complementary, not so much with Aquinas, although we may rightly argue that the mystical side of Aquinas remains in the account of Jugie and his followers largely underappreciated, but perhaps, with Bonaventure², or with the experiential approach of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Jan van Ruysbroeck or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*³. Personally, the closest

2. Bonaventure speaks about uncreated grace, see *Breviloquium*, V.1; See also MURRAY RUSSEL, "Mirror of Experience: Palamas and Bonaventure on the Experience of God – A Contribution to Orthodox-Roman Catholic Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44:3 (2009), 432-460.

3. For the first insights I am especially grateful to Václav Ventura. For his life work that is dedicated to the theme, see *Spiritualita křesťanského mnišství I-III [Spirituality of Christian*

neighbour of hesychast spiritual experience for me has been the Ignatian tradition. While recognising differences⁴ both practices and their theological articulations were for me like speaking two languages, different ones, unmixed, yet both being part of who I am and how I speak.

It is helpful to read in Russell's lecture that both Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, who defended Orthodox language for the experience of God, did not do so in opposition to Western mysticism, but to the Neo-Thomist intellectual analysis which was as much at odds with Western language of direct religious experience and participation in God as the Eastern one⁵.

The sense for the divine mystery which both Lossky and Meyendorff rehabilitate with regard to Orthodox spirituality is expressed in different ways,

Monasticism I-III], Benediktinské arcidiocesi v Břevnově, Praha, 2006, 2010. See also OLIVIER DAVIES, *The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe*, New City Press, New York, 2006; Meister Eckhart was of great interest also to Vladimir Lossky, whose *Essai sur la Théologie Mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient* (1944; 1955) is a polemic with Jugie and Western neo-scholasticism, but not with Western mysticism, and definitely not with Eckhart to the study of whom Lossky dedicated his life. See *Theologie Negative et Connaissance de Dieu Chez Maître Eckhart*, Vrin, Paris, 1960, 2002.

4. I have addressed some of the differences in IVANA NOBLE, "Religious Experience – Reality or Illusion: Insights from Symeon the New Theologian and Ignatius of Loyola", in Boeve, Lieven, Geybels, Hans and Bossche, Stijn Van den, *Encountering Transcendence: Contributions to a Theology of Christian Religious Experience*. Leuven, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005, 375-393. Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev interprets the differences in relation to the ecclesial, theological, cultural, historical, temporal and linguistic contexts, stating that "The impression arises that the two traditions [Eastern and Western] were predestined from the very outset to develop along different lines! This does not mean that the division between East and West that took place in the 11th century was entirely unavoidable; after all, throughout an entire millennium both traditions had lived side by side in the bosom of the one church." ALFEYEV HILARION, "The Patristic Heritage and Modernity", paper delivered at the 9th International Conference on Russian monasticism and spirituality, Bose Monastery (Italy), 20 September 2001, in <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/11/1/2.aspx> (downloaded 28/2/2012, p. 7 of 24).

5. Lossky is more nuanced in the distinction between the mystical and the speculative traditions of the West. Meyendorff tends to create a simplistic picture of the West in asserting as the dominant (if not singular) representation a linear development from Scholasticism, via Nominalism, the Renaissance and the Reformation to the secular Modernity. See MEYENDORFF J., *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 5, 206, 237; *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 157, 171-172. I have criticised this approach in my paper for the conference *The Legacy of Fr. John Meyendorff (1926-1992)* in Paris, 9-12 February 2012, see NOBLE IVANA, "Patristic Synthesis or Non-Synthetic Dialectics? A Critical Evaluation of John Meyendorff's Contribution", prepared for publication in the conference proceedings.

which can enrich each other. While Meyendorff sought for the hesychast synthesis which in his view Palamas defended theologically⁶, Lossky has, in my view better tools to work with the plurality of approaches without making a synthesis out of them. His emphasis on the complementarity between the apophatic and the cataphatic way of knowing God and participating in God, something that has been, as I have experienced, very beneficial for Western Christians, is an important asset to understanding the essence-energy distinction non-metaphysically⁷. Before we move to the question of how that can be done, let us turn to the issue of what a more radical critique of metaphysics coming from both Western and Eastern sources can bring to the debate.

2. Critique of Metaphysics

In my view, Palamas's experiential insights have been especially beneficial to the Western Christians practising hesychasm when they were translated into a non-dualist language. Indeed Western metaphysics largely suffers from ontological dualism of the spiritual and the material; however, this form of dualism can be found also in the ascetic tradition of the Christian East⁸.

6. Meyendorff represents Palamas as someone who theologically holds together a number of elements: Nicephorus's psycho-physical method (perspiration), Evragius' speculative and intellectualist mysticism, the prophetic insights of Symeon the New Theologian and Macarius' spiritual doctrine of the heart. These elements were organised into a single whole, which Gregory of Sinai characterised as hesychast spirituality and which was defended theologically by Gregory Palamas. MEYENDORFF J., *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, SVS, Crestwood, 1998, 129; see also 127.

7. See LOSSKY VLADIMIR, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, SVS, Crestwood, 1978, 31-33; *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Clarke, London, 1973, 8-9; 23-25; 39; 42. Silviu Eugen Rogobete criticizes Lossky for his total apophaticism which, according to him (in my view wrongly) leads both to the antinomic character of God (rather than of our knowledge of God) and to a negative anthropology. See ROGOBETE SILVIU EUGEN, "Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian Participation?: Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Stăniloae," in: Lucian Turcescu (ed.), *Dumitru Stăniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, The Center for Romanian Studies, Iasi - Oxford - Palm Beach - Portland, 2002, 167-206; esp. 167-176. For further criticisms see Colin Gunton, "Relation and Relativity: The Trinity and the Created World," in: Christoph Schwöbel (ed.), *Trinitarian Theology Today*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, 100. A more receptive understanding of Lossky is in Olivie Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology*, New City, London - New York - Manila, 2000, 31.

8. Much depends on how the "flight" from the world and the "hate" of the body, found also

In Orthodox theology a useful critique of metaphysics has been elaborated by Alexander Schmemmann. Especially in his work *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, he criticizes the dualism of the different ontological orders, the natural and the supernatural, and states that impoverishing of the natural order led to the loss of unity between knowing God and participating in God⁹. Schmemmann's criticism of the opposition between matter and Spirit could be usefully extended also to the debate concerning the uncreated deifying grace. From within the symbolic-experiential rather than metaphysical perspective¹⁰, grace would be seen as initiating the direct experience of God, and ontological participation in God. Furthermore, there would be a fruitful dialogue between proponents of his approach and that of the post-Heideggerian philosophers and theologians in the West, such as Jacques Derrida, Louis-Marie Chauvet or Jean-Luc Marion, who arrive at a criticism of metaphysics and non-dualist alternatives by different inspirational sources than the Church fathers, something which Schmemmann does not find possible¹¹.

in the Philokalia were interpreted. Then there are issues concerning gender and sexuality that also need to be revisited. See e.g. JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Paulist Press, Mahawah, 1992, Step 1; 74; SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *On Faith*, in *The Philokalia IV, The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, eds. G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard & K. Ware, Faber & Faber, London – Boston, 1998, 16-24, here 22, 23.

9. This unity is guarded by Schmemmann's strong notion of symbol, which, however, has not been shared by all Orthodox theologians. See *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, SVS, Crestwood, 1998, 139-140; 143-144.

10. The problem of Schmemmann's approach, however, lies in the fact that he identifies the dualist metaphysics exclusively with Western scholasticism or an impact of the Western scholasticism upon Orthodoxy. In my view, dualism can be found also in other inspirational sources more rooted in Orthodoxy, such as the ascetic tradition.

11. See DERRIDA JACQUES, "Différance", in *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1982; "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", in *Derrida and Negative Theology*. 1992, 74-142; MARION JEAN-LUC, *L'idole et la distance: Cinq études*. Grasset, Paris, 1977; *God Without Being*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1991; CHAUVET LOUIS-MARIE, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville M.N., 1995; I have dealt with the themes in NOBLE IVANA, "Apophatic Elements in Derrida's Deconstruction", in Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec (eds), *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2002, 83-93; "Apophatic Aspects of Theological Conversation", in Peter DeMey and Jacques Haers, *Theology and Conversation*, Peeters, Leuven, Paris, Sterling, VA, 2003, 163-175.

This aspect of the debate would be an useful complement, I hope, to the historical reception offered by Russell, which after having sketched Jugie's position, takes us along the path opened by Meyendorff's study of Palamas, later complemented by Christos Yannaras and Kallistos Ware, to a gradual appreciation of Palamism among theologians such as Louis Bouyer, Eric Mascall, André de Halleux, Georges Barrois, Bruce Marshall or Rowan Williams (whom I would count in this camp, despite some disagreements with Kallistos Ware's interpretation). On the other hand, he points out, the hostility to Palamism proposed by Martin Jugie was to different degrees followed by the authors of the *Istina* issue in 1974¹², Gerhard Podskalsky, Dorothea Wendebourg, Dirk Krausmüller or Dom Iltyd Trethowan. These positions seem to have as a common denominator a sharp distinction between the epistemological and the ontological participation in God. A question remains for me here, to what degree these positions, as well as the Orthodox presentations of Palamism they criticize, work with the metaphysical projections alien to the hesychast experience of God.

With the critique of metaphysics in place we can return to the question of the essence-energy distinction and to the debate concerning in which sense it can be helpful to maintain this distinction.

3. The merit of the essence-energy distinction

While demonstrating that the neo-scholastic convictions concerning human nature and the gratuity of supernatural order have never been the only approach among Roman Catholic theologians, Russell points out that the alternatives, such as *nouvelle théologie*, were familiar with the doctrine of deification, including the "vision of humanity transfigured by the divine energies"¹³. Furthermore, even among the Thomists such as the Anglican Eric Mascall, or we can add the Catholic Jacques Maritain, there has been an appreciation of the value of the reality of the mystical experience, and thus

12. Philippe Houdret OCP, Jean-Miguel Garrigues OP, Juan Nadal SJ, Marie Joseph le Guillou (see pp. 6-7).

13. LOT-BORODINE MYRRHA, *La Déification de l'homme selon la doctrine des Pères grecs*, Cerf, Paris, 1970, 10, in Russell's lecture.

common ground with the Palamite tradition could be uphold and explored. Rowan Williams, in my view, has taken a step further, as he engaged with the critique of metaphysics. In this light the essence-energy distinction was found helpful on the epistemological level, and we can even say epistemological-experiential level, but not “as projected onto the level of metaphysics”, Russell says¹⁴.

In the further debate between Williams and Kallistos Ware, as Russell traces it, the concept of a “real distinction” is used, in my view in two different ways. What is at stake for Ware seems to be the doctrine of participation. In other words, knowing God and a real participation in God are two sides of one coin. Epistemology and ontology are not separated from each other, as the participation in God is ontological. Coming back to Palamas’s starting point, the hesychast experience, we can make a step further and say that this is something that can be known from within the experience of the divine illumination. And here, precisely, the distinction essence-energy would be helpful, as speaking from within the mystical experience would still uphold that God remains the mysterious God, even for the one who is illuminated by the uncreated light and embraced in the life of graced participation in the Holy Trinity. The complementarity of the apophatic and cataphatic way, which, it seems to me, Williams wants to keep in place, is not distorted. The real distinction between the divine essence and energies, thus, is not a description of antinomies within God. The question, however, remains in my view, whether participation in God from within the hesychast experience does not indeed mean what was refuted by Trethowan as a “‘having a share in God’ in a quasi-physical sense”¹⁵, or to rephrase it, in a similar sense as we can talk about the resurrection of the body¹⁶!

It is very helpful when Russell takes the dispute about the merit of the essence-energy distinction finally to the question as to what “the contours of the

14. See Russell’s lecture, he refers to Rowan Williams’ unpublished thesis on Lossky.

15. See Russell’s lecture; he refers to TRETHOWAN DOM ILLTYD, “Irrationality in Theology and the Palamite Distinction”, *ECR* 9(1977), 19-26.

16. Is it not precisely the physical side of the hesychast experience that indicates that dualism of the body-spirit does not apply here, and that the kind of mystical experience we are talking here about is not a Neoplatonist suspension of the value of the physical in favour of the ideal, something which was so strongly refuted by the anti-Gnostic Fathers?

Spirit's deifying action" are¹⁷. This question can be followed either through a conceptually-based approach, asking, for example, whether Palamas and Aquinas had similar or different concepts of the God who is in action when deification takes place, and this exploration has its value. It is also possible, I believe, to track where the hesychast experience of God has been passed on or re-emerged. We can investigate how it shed light on other experiences, and in what sense it has been a transfiguring experience for modern and postmodern people. Then, coming to its theological articulation¹⁸, we can seek as to how the essence-energy distinction helps in not projecting the limits of our knowing into God, and knowing that the One-in-Three whom we cannot contain within our categories of thought, is closer to us than we are ourselves, and in his love transforms us into Christ-like new beings, sons and daughters of God.

At the end of my response I would like to thank Norman Russell for an excellent guide through the theological history of the reception of Palamas in the modern/postmodern West, and also for leaving open the door for that which "touches on Christian ecumenical issues, and indeed on matters of personal faith" (p.15).

17. See Russell's lecture, the quotation is taken from MARSHALL BRUCE, "Action and Person: Do Palamas and Aquinas agree about the Spirit?", *SVTQ* 39 (1995), 379-408, here 401.

18. The following example comes from a Czech theologian, to whom I am grateful for introducing me to the Jesus prayer 18 years back: "God infinitely overreaches rational knowledge. Yet, God has given grace to people, a gift of a sense for the divine. Faith is the beginning and a mystical experience is the fulfilment of this sense. That which matters in the relationship between God and people, happens in love. In love, prayer and eucharist God communicates himself to us. His essence, however, remains unknowable, non-communicable. The sharing of God happens in the ways God gives in his love and freedom to share. This is what Palamas and the hesychasts call sharing through the energies. Experience with God is a matter of the whole human person, soul and body, that participate in the transfiguring power of the divine light, and at a profound existential transformation – deification (*theosis*). Christ's transfiguration at the mount Tabor and the mysterious taborite light play an important role in Palamas's theology." VENTURA VÁCLAV, *Spiritualita křesťanského mnišství II-III [Spirituality of Christian Monasticism II-III]*, Benediktinské arcidiocetství v Břevnově, Praha, 2010, 205. In the Czech original it is possible to avoid the trap of exclusive language, in English the price for using inclusive language consistently where it belongs (both about God and people) would mean to obscure the meaning of other emphases valid for the argument. So I apologise in advance to all who feel offended by my failure.