

Introduction
Beyond Agnosticism and Pantheism
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For most contemporary Orthodox theologians the distinction between the divine essence and energies belongs to the very core of the Orthodox tradition and has no direct equivalent in the West. This position has been restated and developed by Professor David Bradshaw in his publication *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge, 2004). However, the views expressed in this book have not remained uncontested. The present volume takes Bradshaw's work as the starting point for an ecumenical debate about this controversial doctrine. Leading Anglican, Calvinist, Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians are given the opportunity to critically assess the essence-energy distinction from historical, theological and philosophical perspectives. The authors contributing to this volume present very different and often mutually incompatible narratives. It becomes clear throughout the book that we have not yet reached an ecumenical consensus about the nature and significance of this doctrine and its relationship to theology in the West.

The content of the book revolves around the following questions: In what way were the Aristotelian concepts of *ousia* and *energeia* used by the Church Fathers, and to what extent were their meanings modified in the light of the Christological and Trinitarian doctrines? What theological function does the essence-energy distinction fulfil in Eastern Orthodoxy with respect to theology, anthropology and the doctrine of creation? What are the differences and similarities between the notions of divine presence and participation in Paul, the Apostolic Fathers, the Cappadocians, Dionysius the Areopagite, John Damascene, Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas? What is the relationship between the essence-energy distinction and the Western ideas of divine presence in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Karl Barth? How is this doctrine related to Kantian and post-Kantian thought and the debate about realism and idealism?

1 Greek East vs. Latin West

David Bradshaw, Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Nikolaos Loudovikos share the view that the essence-energy distinction is a key doctrine in the Orthodox tradition that is without parallel in the West. They are convinced that the Eastern idea of divine presence and participation based on this doctrine is different and theologically superior to the Western alternatives we find in figures such as Augustine and Aquinas. This is not to say that there is complete agreement among these theologians as to how the essence-energy is best to be interpreted. Nonetheless, they all develop – but also correct – the work of Orthodox theologians such as Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff who initiated theological reflection on Palamas about fifty years ago.

David Bradshaw, summarising some of the key points of his book *Aristotle East and West*, first traces the meaning of the term *energeia* from Aristotle through Plotinus, St. Paul, the Apostolic Fathers, to the Cappadocians. In Aristotle the primary meanings of *energeia* are activity and actuality. The substance of the Prime Mover is *energeia*, a being that at the same time *thinks* and *is* all possible intelligent content. A completely different understanding of the first principle we find in Plato: the Good is ‘beyond being’ and the One has no qualities whatsoever; it does not partake of being, has no name, and cannot be an object of knowledge, perception, or opinion. According to Bradshaw, it was Plotinus who harmonized Aristotle’s conception of the first principle with Plato’s. This synthesis resulted in a distinction between an external act or energy (ἐνέργεια ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας) that constitutes the Intellect (νοῦς), the first hypostasis after the One, and an internal act or energy (ἐνέργεια τῆς οὐσίας) that constitutes the substance.

Bradshaw further shows how the passive reading of ἐνεργεῖσθαι in the letters of St. Paul (see e.g. Col. 1:29) enabled the Church Fathers to theologically think synergy between the divine and the human agent. The Cappadocians rejected the Plotinian distinction between the One and the Intellect and differentiated between *God as he is within himself and is known only to himself*, and *God as he manifests himself to others*. Bradshaw makes an important point by emphasising that there is no fixed and permanent boundary between the divine essence and energy. Rather, the unknowable part constitutes a kind of ‘receding horizon’ that allows for ever greater union with God. This dynamic and progressive participation in God *kat’ energeian* forms the basis of the Eastern understanding of deification (θέωσις).

After this genealogical account of the different meanings of the term *energeia*, Bradshaw explains what theological and philosophical function the essence-energy distinction fulfils regarding the questions of *divine freedom*, *apophaticism*, and *divine simplicity*. He argues that this doctrine

enables the East to give better answers to these questions than the West. According to the Eastern understanding of *apophaticism* for instance, God really possesses all the perfections through which we know him, but he possesses them in a way that will always remain beyond our capacities to apprehend. The Church Fathers call the linguistic sedimentations of our religious experiences ἐπίνοιαι, which we form by means of analogy, association, comparison, extrapolation, negation and analysis. Ἐπίνοια must be contrasted with νοήσις, the cognitive act that is fully isomorphic with the ontological structure of the object which it investigates.

In Bradshaw's view, it is the apophatic dimension that is missing in the Western tradition. Augustine thinks of God as that kind of Truth that is present to our mind and which enables us to know. Following the classical identification of being and thinking, God is described as being itself (*ipsum esse*). Augustine thus advocates in principle the Plotinian understanding of the Intellect, but disregards the other aspect of his teaching: the God beyond Being and Intellect.

Constantinos Athanasopoulos in some respect follows Bradshaw by rearticulating the well-known Orthodox critique of Augustine and the Western tradition. He points out that, according to the Latin Church Fathers, human beings can only know God mediated by created things. What Athanasopoulos sees as a weakness in Latin theology, Milbank regards as a central feature of a genuinely Christian and consistently Trinitarian theology. According to the latter, mediation is always already inscribed in the Trinitarian self-disclosure of God towards his creation and is not something extrinsic that needs to be overcome in this earthly life. For Athanasopoulos, however, the invisibility of the divine essence in Augustine is due to its unchangeability, a theological doctrine which he considers problematic and inferior to the Eastern essence-energy distinction. Palamism clearly states that we can see with the sense of sight and with the intellect that which surpasses both sense and intellect.

Athanasopoulos's critique of the West also includes the reception of pre-Christian authors. He views the Eastern reception and interpretation of Aristotle to be historically more accurate than the Western one and criticises Bradshaw for not having paid sufficient attention to this issue. Finally, he raises questions regarding the proper understanding of the divine energies: Is it correct to speak of the divine energies as 'manifestations' of the divine essence? In what sense are the divine energies relational? David Bradshaw, in his commentary at the end of the book, acknowledges the relevance of these questions and answers them.

The focus of Nikolaos Loudovikos's essay is participation and analogy in Palamas and Aquinas. He starts with an outline of the most important features of Palamas' essence-energy distinction and his idea of the synergistic-dialogical encounter between human beings and God. Loudovikos's aim is to refute a number of criticisms of the Byzantine theologian for which he cannot find any evidence in Palamas' work.

Most importantly, he points out that there is a complex and paradoxical interrelationship between the simple divine essence and the divine energy/will. On the one hand, it is divinity *as a whole* that comes in communion with created beings. There is no metaphysical remainder, no 'part of God' that remains hidden from creatures. On the other hand, God is *not exhaustively expressed* in any of his individual works and acts of self-manifestation. Loudovikos gives the following example: When I read one of Palamas' works, Palamas is completely and essentially present in this single work of his. But even if I read and understand this work, together with all other works produced by him in the course of his life, I cannot say that his essence is exhaustively expressed in these works. In other words, the enhypostatic essence is always more than the sum total of its volitional expressions, even if in each expression, all the essence is present and participated in.

Loudovikos's interpretation of the essence-energy distinction in terms of divine inexhaustibility is in line with David Bradshaw's and Roy Clouser's construals of this doctrine. It is to some extent also close to John Milbank's positive idea of participation. The main difference is that Milbank finds this idea realised in a number of pre-Christian and Christian thinkers (e.g. Proclus, Iamblichus, Dionysius the Areopagite *et al.*), but *not* in Palamas – for reasons we will see below. He agrees that it is necessary to distinguish between the gift and the giver, but is very specific about *how* we are to understand this difference. Milbank writes:

. . . [W]hile a giver gives herself without reserve, unless within this giving she nonetheless persists in a certain reticence, she could not be distinguished as a giver from her gift, nor survive her own generosity in order to be the subject of a possible further giving in the future. Nor could the gift given be a gift, rather than a merely transferred object, if it was not a sign of the giver who remains absent from the gift itself. Finally, if the giver did not remain absent, but insisted on accompanying her own gift, the gift given would be wholly a form of pressure on the recipient, not his to freely appropriate in his own mode and at his own pleasure. It follows that, on this model, the severe restraint of the One is not the result of impersonality, but on the contrary indicates a certain transcendent eminence of personhood – even if this was never explicitly articulated by the pagan Neoplatonists. (p. 163)

It seems that Milbank's statement is largely congruent with Palamas' position that the essence-energy distinction is the ontological precondition for God to be *entirely* present in each of his energies. It is arguable that this distinction does not entail the view that a 'part of God' remains unreachable for creation, but must rather be viewed as the condition of possibility of God's diachronic and synchronic self-disclosure without reserve. According

to this reading, the essence-energy distinction does not undermine divine simplicity, but rather *safeguards* it in the infinitely various acts of self-disclosure. In Palamas' own words:

But since God is entirely present in each of the divine energies (ὡς ὅλον ἐν ἐκάστη ὄντα τῶν θεοπρεπῶν ἐνεργειῶν), we name Him from each of them, although it is clear that He transcends all of them. For, given the multitude of divine energies, how could God subsist entirely in each (ὅλος ἐν ἐκάστη) without any division (ἀμερίστως) at all; and how could each provide Him with a name and manifest Him entirely (ὅλος), thanks to indivisible and supernatural simplicity, if He did not transcend all these energies? (*Triads* III, 2, 7)¹

Loudovikos is critical of scholars who try to completely harmonise the thought of Palamas and Aquinas. But he sees a positive – even if incomplete – development from Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* to the *Summa Theologiae* that to some extent approximates Palamas' understanding of participation. In the latter work he discovers a clear distinction between essence and will/energy that is similar to that of Palamas. Yet Loudovikos also points out that, despite this seeming paradigm change, Aquinas falls back into the onto-theologic approach of the *Summa contra Gentiles* and fails to develop an ontology of real participation and communion. His notion of analogy is that of “a monological analogy of emanational similitude”. In Palamas, however, we find “a dialogical synergetic encounter between the uncreated essential divine grace/energy and the created essential human energy that responds...”.

The upshot of Loudovikos's essay is clear: Aquinas and Palamas struggled with the same questions, but Aquinas' most developed insights at best arrive at Palamas' starting point. In other words, Palamas' essence-energy distinction provides the answers to the problems Aquinas could not satisfactorily solve.

2 Cappadocian and Reformational Theology (C/R) vs. Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas (AAA)

Roy Clouser is a proponent of the Neo-Calvinist tradition, also called Reformational Philosophy, whose founding fathers were Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). He sees an affinity between the essence-energy distinction in the Cappadocians and the theology of divine presence in some of the most influential Protestant and Reformed thinkers. The title of his essay, *Pancreation lost: the fall of theology*, refers to the Catholic tradition of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas (AAA). For Clouser, the essence-energy distinction enables us to think pancreationism

1. Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. N. Gendle, ed. J. Meyendorff (Mahwah, 1983), pp. 95–6; Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par J. Meyendorff* (2 vols, Louvain, 1959), vol. 2, p. 657.

in a theologically and philosophically consistent way. The metaphysics of the AAA tradition, by contrast, lacks the appropriate theological categories and concepts to arrive at a satisfactory doctrine of creation and deification.

Clouser's interpretation of the essence-energy distinction is based on a subtle differentiation between three different types of creation and createdness that clearly advances the current debate about this doctrine:

1. According to the first sense of creation, X can be said to be created if there was a time when it did not exist. That is, there was a point at which it came into existence. An uncreated X therefore has no beginning in time.
2. According to the second sense of creation, X is the creation of some cause, which remains ontologically distinct from that cause. This means that an uncreated X is not distinct from its cause.
3. According to the third senses of creation, X is created if its existence depends on some cause. To be uncreated in this sense means to have unconditionally non-dependent existence.

On the basis of this threefold distinction, Clouser thinks of the divine attributes as uncreated₂ but as created₃. God possesses his attributes and communicates them to creation in his energies or activities. On the one hand, his attributes are not identical with his very essence; they are not unconditionally non-dependent, but are dependent on the divine essence – therefore they are created₃. On the other hand, his attributes are not a reality that is ontologically distinct from the divine cause – therefore they are uncreated₂. Clouser adds that some of them may also be created₁.

It is this combination of createdness₃ and uncreatedness₂ that Clouser sees as characteristic of the essence-energy distinction in the Cappadocian Fathers. He finds a similar approach in Reformation thought and quotes Martin Luther, John Calvin and Karl Barth to substantiate this claim. For him the fundamental divide is thus not between East and West, but between Orthodox and Reformational theology (C/R, and Augustine/Anselm/Aquinas (AAA)). Unlike the theology of C/R, the AAA tradition cannot think pancreationism as it problematically identifies God's attributes, which are viewed as perfections, with his being. Under the influence of Plato, God is conceived as first form, as supremely rational and intelligible, and the divine essence as the highest intelligible object. For Clouser, this view is directly opposed to the Cappadocians' apophaticism, which emphasises that God, as the creative source of all rationality, is beyond knowing.

Clouser's interpretation of the essence-energy distinction in terms of uncreated₂ and created₃ is a helpful analytical tool that helps to clarify what this doctrine is all about. But further examination is required to find out how far it can be regarded as an accurate systematisation of the use of the terms *essence* and *energy* in Byzantine theology and philosophy. More

1. 'C' stands for Cappadocians.

problematic is his comparison between the essence-energy distinction in the Cappadocians on the one hand, and Luther, Calvin and Barth on the other. A more comprehensive comparison would undoubtedly bring to light decisive differences between these thinkers. For instance, Luther's distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* is hardly compatible with the (best interpretation of the) Eastern essence-energy distinction in the Cappadocians and Palamas. Even leading Lutheran theologians emphatically insist – against Luther – that God in *maiestate et natura sua* is not a completely unknown, dark and terrifying God – as opposed to the God we know from his works in creation; and that it is theologically problematic to infer from God's *opus alienum* the existence of a *deus absconditus*.¹ But this is exactly what Luther does.

As Clouser himself points out, in Orthodox apophatic theology the divine presence in the energies is not merely a 'mask' behind which lurks another God, whose nature remains utterly hidden. There thus seem to be only two possibilities: either the essence-energy distinction in Palamas is interpreted in terms of the Lutheran distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* (this would confirm John Milbank's critique of Palamas, who claims to discover in Palamas' work a similar paradigm change as in the late Middle Ages in the West); or Luther's theology is construed in terms of the Eastern model of deification and apophaticism, which probably amounts to a historical anachronism.²

3 East and West: Difference-in-Unity or Unity-in-Difference

Antoine Lévy OP provides a very different narrative. He is of the opinion that, although Palamas and Aquinas operated in different cultural milieus and used different theological concepts and models, there is no fundamental divide between how these thinkers thought of the relationship between the created and the uncreated. East and West take different, but not incompatible, approaches to one and the same theoretical object. Lévy thus rejects Bradshaw's claim that the Eastern essence-energy distinction is superior to the understanding of divine presence and analogy in Aquinas and other Latin theologians. His view of the relationship between the Greek East and the Latin West can therefore be characterised as *difference-in-unity* or *unity-in-difference*.

Lévy discusses two alleged inconsistencies of the Western reception of Aristotle: firstly, the overemphasis on efficient causality regarding God's

1. See Eberhard Jüngel, 'The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God. A Contribution to the Protestant Understanding of the Hiddenness of Divine Action', in John B. Webster (ed.), Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and John B. Webster (trans.), *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 136.

2. See the discussion of the 'Finnish School' of Luther research in Reinhard Flogaus, *Theosis bei Luther und Palamas. Ein Beitrag zum ökumenischen Gespräch* (Göttingen, 1996).

activity *ad extra*; and secondly, the disregard for God's freedom with respect to God's activity *ad intra*. As far as the first question is concerned, Lévy points out that the Orthodox understanding of synergy is not opposed to efficient causality. In his reading, the Eastern understanding of divine energy is causal efficiency. The energy effects as pathos, the human reception of a perfective power. Regarding the second question, the point of critique is that an identification of God's essence with his actions, as we find it in Aquinas, does not allow us to think of creation as an absolutely free divine act. Lévy argues that there is of course a type of necessity which is incompatible with freedom, for instance, when a person is forced to do something against his or her will. But if an action originates in a rational being's nature, it would be nonsensical to talk about coercion. Rather, freedom and the capacity for self-determination is a necessary and essential attribute of a rational being.

Having shown why a unified view of the Greek East and Latin West is plausible despite obvious differences in their respective approaches to the question of divine presence and participation, Lévy elaborates on the presuppositions of these differences between East and West. Augustine and Aquinas take a *psychological, creature-centred* approach, which differs from the cosmo-centric framework of the Greek East. In Augustine and Aquinas, all relativity is *on the side of the creature*. From the Western, anthropocentric perspective, God's mysterious activity cannot be grasped by the finite human mind. Despite God's real presence in creation, this presence is not thought of in terms of contingent acts in space and time that can be registered by human cognition. The Eastern, cosmo-centric model, however, locates relativity *on the side of God*. The providential and deifying divine energies proceed from God's immutable essence and permeate creation. They are viewed as an objective reality that can be physically and intellectually experienced by the Christian.

Regarding the relationship between East and West, Lévy's difference-in-unity or unity-in-difference model is the most harmonious and integrative of all the approaches presented in this volume. He has a much more positive view of the Latin West than Bradshaw, Loudovikos, Athanasopoulos and Clouser. And unlike Milbank, Lévy sees Palamas as fully integrated in the Byzantine tradition, and not as an innovator who brings about a problematic paradigm change similar to Duns Scotus in the West. The strength of Lévy's approach is that he views East and West as part of a unified whole, but at the same time contributes to a deeper understanding of the *differences* between the Greek East and the Latin West.

4 East and West: Theological Affinities and Diachronic Decline

John Milbank is critical about the claim that the Orthodox East (as a whole) is superior to the Latin West, the view defended by Bradshaw, Loudovikos, Athanasopoulos and Clouser. He also rejects a (complete) harmonisation between East and West – as advocated by Lévy. Milbank identifies in both

traditions a decline in the late Middle Ages and draws a parallel between the formal distinction in Duns Scotus and the essence-energy distinction in Palamas. On the other hand he sees an affinity between earlier Syrian and Greek authors such as the Cappadocians, Denys the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor on the one hand, and Augustine and Aquinas on the other.

Milbank distinguishes between two radically different notions of participation. The first model suggests that there is a non-participable part in God, which is understood literally in terms of a delineated ontological realm that always remains inaccessible to creation. This hidden realm is to be distinguished from another ontological aspect that *is* shareable. In this model the absolute is thoroughly impersonal and does not give itself without reserve. Donation is viewed as a secondary phenomenon. Plotinian Neoplatonism tends to follow this paradigm of participation. It is characterised by a certain reservation with respect to the reach of both descent and ascent.

The second model acknowledges the paradoxical character of participation and emphasises at once God's simplicity and the kenotic divine self-partition with respect to creation. Here donation is viewed as ontologically primordial. If the One is called 'imparticipable', this means that it is absolutely equally close to everything that proceeds from it, to all finite beings. The One gives itself absolutely and without reserve, but precisely because it does give itself in such a radical way, it cannot be identified with its diversity of gifts, which always remain less than the giver. This second notion of participation Milbank finds in the theurgic Neoplatonists (Proclus, Iamblichus), and – in a more radical and explicitly Christian form – in Latin and Greek Church Fathers such as Dionysius, Boethius, Augustine, the Cappadocians, John Damascene and Maximus the Confessor.

The positive reception of theurgic Neoplatonism by Christian theology had a number of reasons: first, Christian theology insisted on the *absolute simplicity* of God; second, based on the Trinitarian understanding of the doctrine that 'God is Love', Christianity viewed God's self-sharing as an attribute of his very essence – though without abandoning the monotheistic belief that his essence was radically incommunicable. According to Milbank, *gift* and *paradox* must therefore be viewed as fundamental dimensions of Christian theology.

Moreover, for a consistently Trinitarian theology, whose centre is the divine love, 'immediate' participation in the life of God is only possible by virtue of cosmic and corporeal 'mediation': "Just the same paradox which renders the imparticipable and the participated coincident, renders also the immediate and the mediated coincident". Mediation pertains to the Godhead itself, so that there is no need for a mediating sphere between the created and the uncreated realms. This metaphysical framework allows for 'radical descent' as well as 'radical ascent', i.e. the gulf between the uncreated and the created is fully bridged, yet without in any way blurring the difference between these two realms.

Milbank agrees with Bradshaw's interpretation of the idea of *energeia* as communicating action and synergy and underlines its importance for the understanding of the second model of participation outlined above. He also approves of Bradshaw's analysis of how theurgic Neoplatonism, St. Paul and the Cappadocians contributed in various ways to the wide range of meanings of this term. Milbank and Bradshaw part ways, however, on their assessment of the work of Palamas. For Bradshaw, Palamas primarily synthesises under the heading of the divine energies many of the theological ideas of the preceding centuries, although this synthesis remains incomplete.¹ Milbank, by contrast, identifies in the thought of Palamas a real paradigm change, a deviation from a genuinely Christian understanding of divine presence and participation. This deviation can roughly be described in terms of a shift from the second model of participation outlined above to the first one. Although Milbank does not suggest that Palamas teaches a real distinction between the divine essence and energy, he criticises the Byzantine theologian for introducing something like a formal distinction between the divine essence and energy/will, similar to that of John Duns Scotus in the West. Furthermore, unlike Bradshaw, he finds in Thomas Aquinas a sophisticated form of the second model, which is characterised by 'gift and paradox'.

Consequently, on Milbank's reading of the history of theology, the most significant theological differences do not coincide with the East-West divide. Rather, the fundamental paradigm changes occurred, more or less simultaneously in the Latin West and Greek East, around 1300 AD – though the East was less affected by this degeneration than the West. For Milbank, this 'Radically Orthodox' position opens up new possibilities for the ecumenical dialogue, as truth is no longer associated with either East or West, but rather with theological paradigms that once existed in both East and West, but were then gradually lost. Accordingly, the recovery and retrieval of an appropriate model of participation, which integrates aspects from both East and West, can only be a common task for both traditions.

To sum up: for Milbank the question of participation is closely intertwined with the question of mediation. The theologically appropriate model of participation can be described as follows: "If the imparticipable is itself participated, then it is equally the immediate that is itself mediated". In Palamas, however, mediation is rather viewed as an obstacle to the direct vision of the divine essence, so that one constantly aims to escape it, even if this turns out to be impossible.

Milbank's reflections on participation and mediation should be read as an invitation to Orthodox theologians to further analyse the theology of Palamas and its relationship to the West. As far as Milbank's distinction between the two different models of participation is concerned, most (Orthodox) theologians would probably agree that the second model,

1. See Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, pp. 241–2.

which is characterised by ‘gift and paradox’ (‘radical participation’), is indeed preferable to the first one. Yet, as a number of contributors to this volume have shown, it is plausible to interpret Palamism along the lines of the second model rather than the first. Like Milbank, Palamas points out that “God, while remaining entirely in Himself, dwells entirely in us by His superessential power. . . .” (*Triads* I, 3, 23).¹ Palamas also interprets the light of Thabor as a ‘natural symbol’ of the divine essence. Using the solar paradigm and other imagery, he remarks that a “. . . natural symbol always accompanies the nature which gives them being, for the symbol is natural to that nature. . . .” (*Triads* III, 1, 14).² Palamas thus clearly lays the foundation for a realist understanding of divine presence and self-disclosure.

For this reason Palamas underlines that the experience of the divine light and the divine energy is an *immediate* experience of God. This notion of immediacy is not an innovation in Byzantine theology. Maximus the Confessor, for instance, speaks of the direct experience (πεῖρα) and immediate perception (αἴσθησις) of God, which surpasses rational and conceptual knowledge about God.³ But how can this immediacy be reconciled with the ‘hiddenness’ of the divine essence? Once again, as particularly Bradshaw, Loudovikos and Clouser remark, by experiencing the divine energies we directly participate in God and are not restricted to a ‘divine mask’, behind which lurks an unknown and possibly dark deity. It is rather the synchronic and diachronic *inexhaustibility* of the divine self-manifestation and its human reception that constitutes the divine mystery.⁴ This also explains why it would be nonsensical in Orthodoxy to hope for a direct vision of the divine essence in the Eschaton: there are infinite degrees of union with God, but already here and now, we experience God himself, and not a ‘secondary God’.

But Milbank is entirely right in pointing out that in Christian theology we always have to do with a ‘mediated immediacy’. There can be now question that in the Byzantine tradition ‘immediate experiences’ of God, at least on the highest level, are always seen as the result of a long and arduous appropriation of the tradition’s wisdom. The latter consists in the linguistic and non-linguistic sedimentations of previous generations of God-seekers, whose ‘depth grammar’ was articulated in the Ecumenical Councils, local synods, and other theological and spiritual texts or collections of texts.⁵ The experience of the divine

1. Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. N. Gendle, p. 39.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

3. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium* 60 (CCSG 22, 77–8).

4. Cf. Serge Boulgakov, *La Philosophie du verbe et du nom*, trans. Constantin Andronikof (Lausanne, 1991), pp. 171–3.

5. For an overview of the wide of variety of genres of text produced in the first five centuries see Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (eds), *The*

energies, as described and analysed by Palamas and his allies, cannot be separated from participation in the sacramental life of the Church, which is inconceivable without the mediation of creaturely signs. According to Meyendorff, Palamas paved the way for a “scriptural and sacramental realism”,¹ which becomes evident, for instance, in the work of Nicholas Cabasilas (1319/1323–1391) and Symeon of Thessaloniki (ca. 1381–1429).²

The Jesus Prayer, which stands at the centre of the hesychast tradition, provides further evidence how important mediation is in Orthodox spirituality. In the wake of the *Imiaslavie* controversy at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mediatory function of the ‘Name of God’ in the Jesus Prayer was meticulously analysed.³ The Russian religious thinkers Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov, for instance, responded to this controversy by developing sophisticated ‘theologies of language’. They both came to the conclusion that the statement “the Name of God is God” is theologically legitimate as long as its irreversibility is strictly upheld. The copula ‘is’ between the subject and the predicate, they argued, does not signify equality or identity, for to say that “God is the Name of God” would amount to idolatry and blasphemous heresy. Even in the first statement “the name of God is God” the predicate θεός ἐστίν cannot be replaced by the phrase ὁ θεός ἐστίν. Referring explicitly to Palamas, both Florensky and Bulgakov point out that the predicate ‘is God’ does not signify a substantial identity between the hypostatic essence of God and his name, but a manifestation of the divine energy.⁴

To sum up, the essence-energy distinction, as interpreted by Florensky and Bulgakov, serves as the foundation for a notion of divine presence that is conceived in terms of a ‘mediated immediacy’. Both thinkers agree that for a Christological and Trinitarian understanding of God, mediation is not something extrinsic, but belongs to the very life of God. At the same time, they maintain a realist position regarding linguistic and non-linguistic meaning that needs to be further analysed.

Cambridge History of the Early Christian Literature (Cambridge, 2004).

1. John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and orthodox spirituality* (Crestwood, NY, 1974), p. 135.
2. Michael Kunzler, *Gnadenquellen: Symeon von Thessaloniki als Beispiel für die Einflussnahme des Palamismus auf die orthodoxe Sakramententheologie und Liturgik* (Trier, 1989).
3. For a comprehensive account of this controversy see Hilarion Alfeyev, *Le mystère sacré de l’Eglise. Introduction à l’histoire et à la problématique des débats athonites sur la vénération du nom de Dieu* (Fribourg, 2007).
4. Bulgakov, *Philosophie du verbe et du nom*, pp. 205–6; Pavel Florensky, ‘Onomatodoxy as a Philosophical Premise’, in P. Florensky, *At the Watersheds of Thought* (2 vols, Moscow, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 281–321, esp. 299–306 (in Russian).

5 The essence-energy distinction between Realism and Idealism

Nick Trakakis is the only author who relates the essence-energy distinction to modern and contemporary thought. He tries to initiate a dialogue between Palamas, Immanuel Kant, Gottlob Frege and John Hick. As he points out, he wishes “to examine, or re-examine the controversy over the essence-energy distinction by employing the kinds of tools and methods found in contemporary discussions in philosophy of religion”. Thus the following question arises: does Trakakis want to read Palamas through Kant, Frege and Hick, in the sense that the philosophical schemes and models provided by these thinkers are taken to be criteriologically normative for a contemporary interpretation of Palamas? Or does the mutual interpenetration of theology and philosophy advocated by the author also allow for a Palamite *critique* of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy? Trakakis wants to explore whether the essence-energy distinction can be shown to be coherent, intelligible and free from internal contradiction. But he also emphasises that such an explication must do justice to the theological purpose of this doctrine, namely to think of deification (*theosis*) in a realist (and not merely metaphorical) fashion.

Applying Frege’s famous distinction between ‘sense’ (*Sinn*) and ‘reference’ (*Bedeutung*) to Palamas, Trakakis states that the expressions ‘divine essence’ and ‘divine energies’ have the same referent, but differ in sense. Furthermore, he suggests that the different names of God (such as ‘goodness’ and ‘wisdom’) can be construed as different ‘senses’, as different ways of perceiving and conceiving God. In other words, the different senses are the different ways we perceive God’s action and presence in the world, while his essence remains hidden and unknowable. Yet Trakakis insists that talk of the divine energies is not merely a metaphorical or fictional construct, “but represents a way of thinking about the divinity that is literally and objectively true”. The energies and the names of God are modes of presentation that accurately represent who God is, and do not merely have a nominal character.

Trakakis then turns to David Bradshaw’s statement that “the distinction between the divine *ousia* and *energeia* is like that between the Kantian noumena and phenomena.”¹ On Trakakis reading, Kant sought a middle way between the idealist view that reality is wholly constituted by the human mind, and the naïve realist view that we can access a completely mind-independent reality as it is in itself. Kant’s ‘transcendental idealism’ holds (against idealism) that there is an external reality beyond our minds, and (against naïve realism) that this reality can never be perceived as it is in itself, but always as structured by the transcendental categories of the human mind. Drawing on Stephen Palmquist and Jeffrey Privette, Trakakis advocates a non-dualistic, ‘one-world’ or ‘double-aspect’ reading of the Kantian noumenon-phenomenon distinction. On this reading, the noumenal and the phenomenal are two different aspects of the same reality

1. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, p. 169.

and do not constitute two separate worlds. There is some continuity between appearances and things in themselves, which means that Kant can be read in a realist way. Although we cannot experience the noumenal itself, we can experience it *in part*; but the part we experience we experience *in truth*.

According to Trakakis, if one reads Kant along these lines, the noumenon-phenomenon distinction can indeed help us understand Palamas' essence-energy distinction. As he points out, "I would even go so far as to say that the distinctions drawn by the Palamites and those made by the Kantians and Fregeans are all, at bottom, variations on the same theme".

To be sure, any engagement of Orthodox theologians and philosophers with modern and post-modern thought is to be welcomed. The contemporary debate about the essence-energy distinction and Palamas can only gain from a dialogue with continental and analytic philosophy of religion. Also a juxtaposition of the essence-energy distinction with Kant can certainly deepen our understanding of both Palamas and Kant. But Trakakis goes much further than that: he first interprets Kantianism in terms of a subtle form of realism (or a synthesis of realism and idealism), and then (more or less) equates Palamism with this realist Kantianism. The main question is to what extent Kant can be legitimately called a realist, and whether a realist reading of his work is historically plausible. As Trakakis himself points out, a great number of commentators would deny this.

It is indeed true that Christian theology has to take into account the complex relationship between mind-independent and mind-dependent being, and that a 'naïve realism' which completely disregards the knowing subject is not a viable option. But it is questionable whether Kantianism represents a convincing solution to this problem. In Kant, it is the human mind that provide the condition of possibility of being to become manifest as intelligible. There can be no doubt that "being is intelligible because mind makes it intelligible".¹ The mediating mind and self-transcendence take precedence over transcendence as being-other and the mind-independent intelligibility of being.

It is not that Kant denies any relation between thought and mind-independent reality. First, he maintains that the thing-in-itself *exists*, for otherwise there would be appearances without anything that appears, which is inconceivable for Kant (KrV B XXVI-XXVII). Secondly, he points out that the thing-in-itself is *non-contradictory*. We are able to know *a priori* that logical contradiction is absolutely impossible, which means that logicity pertains to the phenomenal and the noumenal realm. The thing-in-itself is intelligible and thus also thinkable. It is only that we cannot know anything about it.² The idealist aspect of Kant's thought prevails over the realist aspect.

1. William Desmond, *Being and the Between* (New York, 1995), p. 27.

2. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier (London, 2008), pp. 31–36.

His transcendental philosophy entails the view that whatever we apprehend in all that we apprehend of our experiences is a product of the human mind's representations;¹ even if it is not denied that there is 'something' that exists external to and independently of the mind and its representations.

For Pavel Florensky, Kantianism correctly teaches that the essence of a thing is irreducible to its appearance; that the essence is always more than that which appears. In this respect, Florensky argues, Kantianism is superior to immanentism, which fully equates appearance with essence and essence with appearance, resulting in a problematic reductionism. However, Kantianism, like positivism, wrongly believes that reality does not manifest itself in appearances and that we *only* have to do with appearances. Florensky sees Palamism² as a convincing ontological and epistemological alternative to Kantianism, immanentism and positivism. On his interpretation, the Palamite essence-energy distinction resembles Kantianism in so far as both positions insist on the independent reality of the essence; and it resembles immanentism in so far as both theories state that appearances really reveal the essence.³ But, as outlined above, Palamism emphasises – against immanentism – the inexhaustibility of essences, the fact that no individual appearance, or series of appearances, can fully manifest the underlying reality.⁴

This brief sketch of some of Florensky's reflections on the philosophy of Kant is intended as an invitation to take Florensky's work on Kant into account for theological debates about Palamas and Kant, and about realism and idealism.

6 The Distinction between Essence and Energy in Maximus the Confessor and Basil the Great

His Eminence Metropolitan Vasilios of Constantia and Ammochostos and Georgios Martzelos analyse the essence-energy distinction in the work of Basil the Great and Maximus the Confessor. In their contributions, the emphasis is not on the similarities and differences between the Eastern and Western tradition, but on the meaning of this doctrine in its original historical context. This is not to say that they view the significance of the essence-energy distinction as historically limited. Quite the reverse: they both argue that Maximus and Basil made crucial contributions to the development of a Christian ontology that are still of relevance for contemporary theology and philosophy.

1. John Deely, *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics: the quasi-error of the external world with a dialogue between a 'semiotist' and a 'realist'* (South Bend, Ind., 2003), p. 26.

2. Florensky at times uses the terms Palamism and Platonism as synonyms.

3. Pavel Florensky, 'Onomatodoxy as a Philosophical Premise', pp. 304–6.

4. For an overview of Florensky's interpretation and critique of Kant see Frank Haney, 'Pavel Florensky und Kant – ein wichtige Seite der russischen Kant-Rezeption', *Kant Studien*, 92/1 (2001): pp. 81–103.

Metropolitan Vasilios gives a detailed account of the different theological functions of the essence-energy distinction in the thought of Maximus the Confessor. He underlines the interconnection between this distinction and the doctrine of Christ's two natures, wills, and energies. Building upon Aristotelian philosophy, the Cappadocian Fathers, the Areopagite, and Cyrill of Alexandria, Maximus bequeaths to the Christian tradition a new ontological paradigm regarding the relationship between essence, will and energies that is equally important for the doctrine of God and theological anthropology.

The relationship between essence, will and energy corresponds to Maximus' triads 'essence – power/movement – energy' and 'being – well-being – eternal being'. The fact that Maximus talks about the 'essential' or 'substantial' energy or will does not mean that an essence/nature wills and acts by necessity. Rather, spiritual beings possess 'free movement', i.e. they are naturally free willed and are able to exert self-determination.

Metropolitan Vasilios also clarifies the relationship between the divine energy and Trinitarian theology. Energy does not have a hypostatical character, it is not associated with the 'first essence' – to use Aristotelian terminology. Rather, essence and nature are defined as that which is common in beings that belong to the same genre. With respect to the divine essence and the Trinitarian life, there is one essence and one energy, but three hypostases.

It also becomes clear in the course of his article that in Maximus, the well-known distinction between the one *Logos* and the many *logoi* does by no means replace the essence-energy distinction. God is found entirely and perfectly in the *logos* of each being and in all beings together, without his essence being divided and without his simplicity being affected. It is within the *logoi* of being that the *nous* discerns the divine presence in the form of the divine energies. The *logoi* of beings also play an important role in Maximus' doctrine of creation. The *logos* of each being existed already before creation, i.e. it existed timelessly within the eternal will of God. The transition of beings from non-existence to existence is brought about by the divine energy. Maximus' cosmology is thus correctly called 'exemplarism': the world is created from divine ideas, but there is a clear ontological distinction between created and uncreated.

According to Maximus, the divine works can either be created or uncreated. Created works have a 'beginning', uncreated works do not have a beginning, but are eternally and timelessly 'begotten' by God. The eternally begotten, uncreated works are, for example, goodness, life, immortality, simplicity, immutability and infinity, in which the created works participate. The created works and their essences are not self-subsistent but receive their being from the eternal and timeless 'core of being'.

Metropolitan Vasilios's contribution shows nicely how central the essence-energy distinction is in Maximus – a thinker who lived seven

centuries before the Palamite controversy in the fourteenth century. To be sure, the use of the same terminology does not mean that this doctrine fulfils *exactly* the same function in Maximus and in Palamas. Nonetheless, many misunderstandings of the essence-energy distinction could be avoided if Palamas was read in the light of Maximus and other patristic authors. As not only David Bradshaw, but also Jean-Claude Larchet has recently shown, the essence-energy distinction is indeed an integral part of the theological framework of the Greek Church Fathers.¹

A good example is Georgios Martzelos's interpretation of the work of Basil the Great. Martzelos reflects on the ontological and gnoseological significance of the essence-energy distinction in the work of this Church Father. Historically speaking, Basil reacted to the challenges of the Eunomians and the Pneumatomachians. The Eunomians taught a two-fold subordinationism by distinguishing ontologically between the 'unbegotten', the 'begotten', and the 'created'. The term 'unbegotten' refers to the Father, 'begotten' to the Son, and 'created' to all creation, among which the Eunomians included the Holy Spirit. The 'begotten' came into being through the energy of the 'unbegotten' and the 'created' through the energy of the 'begotten'. At the same time, they defended the possibility of full knowledge of the divine essence by created beings. As the name 'unbegotten' ontologically defines and represents the very essence of God, knowledge of this name gives us full access to the divine essence.

Basil corrects this view by introducing an *apophatic reserve*: the names 'unbegotten' and 'begotten' do not denote the essence of the Father and the Son respectively, but the particular manner of their existence by which the different hypostases can be distinguished. But as with the essence of God, the different manners of existence of the hypostases are exclusively known to these hypostases themselves and remain unknown and indescribable to human beings. Basil avoids agnosticism by stating that, although God is completely inaccessible and inconceivable according to his essence and inner-Trinitarian life, he reveals himself in his energies, which are manifest in creation and in the economy of salvation. The perception of divine presence in the energies requires the ethical and spiritual purification of the human mind and its illumination.

This ontological framework also enabled Basil to answer the question about the relationship between faith and knowledge. Faith and knowledge are closely interconnected and form a functional unity. Both approaches are grounded in the energies of God manifest in Creation, and no human faculty or capacity can be thought of without its relation to God. The

1. Jean-Claude Larchet, *La théologie des énergies divines: des origines à saint Jean Damascène* (Paris, 2010).

encounter with God in all its dimensions therefore cannot be reduced to merely conceptual knowledge of the idea of God. Rather, knowledge, faith and worship form the three stages of the relationship with God which are interrelated through the divine energies.

Basil's teaching on the ontological and gnoseological significance of the distinction between God's essence and energies made a significant contribution not only to the emerging doctrines of the Trinity, Pneumatology and Christology, but also to the way the relationship between the uncreated and the created was conceived in Orthodox cosmology and soteriology. Also his reflections on the origin and nature of the divine names are carried out on the basis of the essence-energy distinction. His teaching thus paved the way for the later debates on these issues in the fourteenth century.

David Bradshaw concludes this collection of essays by commenting on each of the contributions. It is to be hoped that the creative dialogue started in this book will find a continuation. The debate about the Eastern essence-energy distinction raises some of the most central questions discussed in the history of Christian theology and philosophy: How can the transcendent and uncreated God be fully and unreservedly present in the immanent and created, without abandoning his transcendence? How can both pantheism and agnosticism be avoided? Critical reflection on the nature and significance of the essence-energy distinction promises to be fruitful for the ecumenical debates of the next decades.

The debate about East and West will be significantly enriched by a forthcoming publication with the title *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, which looks at Orthodox interpretations of Thomas Aquinas from the fourteenth-century scholar Demetrios Kydones up to the twentieth century.¹

1. Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford, 2012).