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This article discusses the historical origins and the development of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of the divine energies. After a brief discussion of Aristotle and Plotinus, an overview is given of the relevant biblical material in the Old and New Testament. The article then looks at the patristic and Byzantine period, focusing on the Cappadocians, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas. This is followed by an account of the revival of the doctrine of the divine energies in twentieth-century Orthodox theology. It also provides examples of how this doctrine was used by Orthodox thinkers to address epistemological and ontological questions raised in modern Western philosophy. The final part examines some of the most important ecumenical responses to the doctrine of the divine energies from Protestant, Catholic, and Anglican perspectives.

Keywords: Divine energies, Essence-energy distinction, Eastern Orthodox theology, Apophaticism, Mysticism, Byzantine theology, (Neo-)Palamism, Ecumenical theology, Theology and philosophy, Russian religious thought, Hesychasm, Name-Glorifiers (imiaslavie)

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1 Introduction

Most contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians regard the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies (Greek *energeia* [singular] or *energeiai* [plural]) as one of the central doctrines in Orthodox theology. The origin of this doctrine can be traced back to the patristic period, though the philosophical concept *energeia* was already used in the pre-Christian era. It is one of the key ideas in Aristotle and also plays an important role in Neoplatonism. The specifically Christian understanding of *energeia* is intimately connected with the christological and trinitarian doctrines, yet no dogmatic decisions were taken by the seven Ecumenical Councils about the distinction between the divine energies and the divine essence. However, the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (681 CE), elaborating on the doctrinal decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), distinguished between two natural energies or activities (*energeiai*) in Christ, the human and the divine. It was only in the fourteenth century, during the Hesychast controversy, that a series of Constantinopolitan councils endorsed the essence-energy distinction (1341, 1347, 1351, and 1368). There is an ongoing debate about how far the theological understanding of the essence-energy distinction changed between the fourth and the fourteenth century. The twentieth century witnessed a revival of the doctrine of the divine energies in Eastern Orthodoxy and elicited a lively and often controversial ecumenical debate.

2 *Energeia* in pre-Christian Greek philosophy

2.1 Aristotle

Energeia is one of the key concepts in Aristotle's metaphysics and – depending on context – is best translated as either actuality or activity. Its correlate is the term *dynamis*, which means either potentiality or capacity. The need for the differentiation between *dynamis* and *energeia* is obvious, Aristotle argues, for it is possible for someone to possess a particular capacity without permanently exercising it. For instance, I still have the capacity to walk even if I do not walk (*Metaphysics* [*Met*] IX.3 1047a20–30; Aristotle 2014: 1653). Or a statue of Hermes exists in the block of wood potentially, as opposed to a thing that is already realized and thus exists in actuality (*Met* IX.6 1048a31–34; Aristotle 2014: 1655).

Aristotle scholarship has paid a lot of attention to the Stagirite's distinction between *energeia* and movement or change (*kinēsis*) (*Met* IX.6 1048b18–34; Aristotle 2014: 1656). Aristotle takes actions (*praxeis*) such as seeing or understanding to be events with intrinsic ends: when I see a thing, I have seen it – i.e. the activity is always already complete, and in this sense, lacks temporal duration; when I understand something, I have understood it. Linguistically speaking, the present and perfect forms of these verbs are inextricably intertwined. The aspect of the Greek perfect expresses the fulfilment of the end that is

aimed at in a particular action. According to the traditional interpretation, Aristotle calls this class of actions *energeiai*. Changes (or movements) such as learning, walking, or building are incomplete and have the character of a temporal process with extrinsic ends. For example, when I build a house – i.e. when I am in the process of building a house – I cannot say that 'I have built the house', or when I walk that 'I have taken a walk'. These kinds of actions are incomplete in themselves but aim at achieving a particular end in the future (Beere 2009).

However, despite the significance assigned to this passage in Aristotle research, recent scholarship has shown, based on textual, contextual, and linguistic evidence, that in Aristotle's work as a whole *kinēsis* is also viewed as *energeia* – but as incomplete *energeia*. The passage analysed above is the sole place in Aristotle's corpus where *energeia* is opposed to *kinesis*. Even in *Metaphysics* IX.8, the immediate context of this passage, Aristotle distinguishes between complete and incomplete *energeiai*, and sees *kinēsis* as belonging to the latter class (*Met* IX.8 1050a–b2; Aristotle 2014: 1658–1659). The notion of *kinēsis* as incomplete *energeia* has turned out to be the dominant one in Aristotle's corpus.

Aristotle famously states that the essence (*ousia*) of the prime mover is *energeia* (*Met* XII.6 1071b20; Aristotle 2014: 1693), understood both in the sense of activity and actuality. The prime mover is *energeia* because the goal of its activity is intrinsic to the activity, and it is pure actuality since it is free of all unrealized potentiality. The notion of the prime mover is resorted to in order to explain motion, which, according to Aristotle, is continuous and eternal, i.e. unceasing (*Met* XII.6 1071b12–22; Aristotle 2014: 1693). The prime mover moves without being moved. It is the ultimate, changeless, eternal first cause of change, particularly of the eternal uniform circular motion of the first heaven. Aristotle's argument for the existence of a first cause relies on the principle of sufficient reason: the first heaven is contingent in the sense that it could have moved in a different way and thus needs an ultimate, necessary cause to explain why it moves in this rather than another way. This necessary cause is the prime mover, which in turn does not need a further explanation (*Met* XII.7 1072b3–10; Aristotle 2014: 1694).

Yet the way Aristotle envisages the prime mover to move the first heaven cannot be grasped in terms of what we normally understand by (efficient) causality. The uniform circular motion of the first heaven is eternal, and the function of the prime mover is not to change its state from rest to motion. The prime mover, which always remains changeless, does not strictly speaking act or interact with that which it moves. Rather, the prime mover moves the cosmos as its object of desire (*to orekton*) and rational thought (*to noēton*), as its ultimate *telos* (*Met.* XII.7 1072a20–27; Aristotle 2014: 1694). The natural cosmos strives to be as perfect as the ultimate cause of change, but as a material, changing, and

contingent thing its eternal uniform circular motion is the best possible approximation to the perfection of the changeless prime mover.

The activity of the prime mover is rational thought (*noēsis*) exercised by the intellect (*nous*), which Aristotle views as the 'best life': 'Therefore it must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking' (*Met.* XII.9 1074b33–34; Aristotle 2014: 1698).

2.2 Platonism and Neo-Platonism

In Plotinus we find, to some extent, a synthesis of Aristotelian and Platonic thought. Under the influence of Plato's statement that the Good is superior to being (*Republic* 509b; Plato 1997: 1130), there is a heightened emphasis on apophaticism. Plotinus follows the 'principle of prior simplicity' (O'Meara 1995: 45), which states that 'there must be something simple prior to all things and different from all things after it […]' (*Enneads* [*En*] V.4.1; Plotinus 2018: 577). He concludes that divine intellect cannot be this first principle. Aristotle had argued that divine intellect thinking itself is one with the object of thought and thus absolutely simple. Plotinus, by contrast, believes that divine intellect is a compound. First, there is a duality between the act of thinking (*noēsis*) and the object thought (*noēton*), and second, the object of thought is itself composite. For this reason, Plotinus posits the One as the ultimate cause that is absolutely simple and beyond divine intellect.

This first principle, or first Good – which is the most self-sufficient, the most perfect, and the most powerful of all beings – is also the productive power of all things. The One cannot remain in itself but overflows in its superabundance, while abiding unchanged in the act of generation. What is generated by the One is thinking (*noēsis*) that turns to its origin and thinks this origin, which thus becomes its object of thought (*noēton*). Thinking thereby perfects itself and becomes Intellect (*nous*) (*En* V.2.1; Plotinus 2018: 549–550).

Plotinus explains this act of generation by introducing the doctrine of double activity: 'There is activity (*energeia*) which is activity of the substance and there is activity which arises from the substance of each thing' (*En* V.4.2: Plotinus 2018: 570). The activity *of* an entity's substance is this entity, while the activity that goes out *from* an entity's substance derives from the former but is different from it. For instance, in fire there is an essential heat, an internal activity, but also an external activity that proceeds from this essential heat, when fire exercises its essential activity qua fire without undergoing change. The light analogy figures prominently in Plotinus' *Enneads*. The external activity of the One is 'in a way like light from the sun […] that which comes from it is not cut off from it, nor is it, again, identical with it' (*En* V.3.12; Plotinus 2018: 569). Light eternally radiates from the One, encircling it, while it remains in a state of repose (*En* V.1.6; Plotinus 2018: 540). But this external activity would not exist without the internal activity in the One that produces

light, which is ‘like the life of the luminous body’ (*En* IV.5.7; Plotinus 2018: 477). Plotinus calls the internal activity also the first principle of the activity or source. The external activity, by contrast, is a secondary activity, an image of what is inside the One, without being detached from it (*En* IV.5.7; Plotinus 2018: 477).

The One acts both as efficient cause and as final cause (Bussanich 1996: 46–55). As efficient cause it is the causal origin of reality from which proceed lower entities (*proodos*), and as final cause it draws these entities back to itself (*epistrophē*). The generation of the potential Intellect (*nous*) is the primary product of the One’s causality, while the potential Intellect’s end is its actualization and perfection, accomplished by its reversion to the One. Combining Aristotelian and Platonic elements, the One qua final cause is both the object of cognition and the highest Good (*Republic* 508e–9d; Plato 1997: 1129–1130). Thinking arises when the already existing One moves the (potential) Intellect, which came to be, to itself. In other words, intellection is ‘motion [*kinēsis*] towards the Good that it [i.e. Intellect] desires’ (*En* V.6.5: Plotinus 2018: 602). By contemplating the Good, the Intellect not only thinks the One, but also itself: contemplation of the One is concomitantly self-contemplation. The One’s external activity, the procession, brings the (potential) Intellect into existence and sustains it, thus enabling the latter’s own internal activity, its self-constitution as Intellect and Being accompanied by self-contemplation and self-awareness.

3 The divine energies and Holy Scripture

3.1 The glory of God (*kavod*) and *energeia* in the Old Testament

For the church fathers, all Christian theology is interpretation of Holy Scripture. While they heavily drew on Greek philosophical ideas and concepts, these concepts and ideas were modified and reinterpreted in the light of the biblical narratives. In the Old Testament, the concept of the glory of God, in Hebrew *kavod*, is of particular interest for the formation of Greek patristic doctrine of the divine energies (Bradshaw 2006b). In their writings, the Greek church fathers quoted extensively from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). Yet contemporary, non-Orthodox scholarship also brings to light striking affinities between the doctrine of the divine energies and the idea of *kavod*.

The glory of God is a key theological term in the Old Testament that has several interrelated core meanings: (1) dignity, high position, honour visibly expressed in wealth or external splendour; (2) respect or reverence; (3) object of respect; (4) God’s manifest presence; (5) means of referring to oneself (‘my glory’; Collins 1997).

Meaning (4) and (5) raise the key question (which applies equally to the Greek concept of the divine energy) of how God’s presence in his glory is related to ‘God himself’; how his self-manifestation and self-revelation can be thought of while safeguarding his

transcendence. Attempts have been made to understand *kavod* as something between a hypostasis and God's glorious acts (de Vries 2016: 173). While in some passages *kavod* is equated with God himself (Isa 6:2), his glory is also manifest in the saving nature of his deeds. *Kavod* is God turned towards human beings and creation, but it is also a revelation of God's inner being, of God himself (de Vries 2016: 51, 117). In Exod 33:14–18, the glory of God is identified with his countenance (*panim*) – though the subsequent theophany is characterized by an apophatic reserve (see Exod 33:20–23). A further, theologically relevant, similarity between the Greek patristic doctrine of the divine energies and *kavod* is the notion of God's presence in his name(s). In patristic thought, the divine energies reveal a plurality of divine names, none of which can exhaustively describe God (see section 4.1). In the Old Testament, too, there is a close connection between God's glory and his name (*shem*), which both reveal God's closeness and presence (e.g. 1 Kgs 8:15–53).

Meaning (1) and (4) become manifest in the Old Testament narratives that conjoin God's glory with the appearance of light. Like the hesychast experience of the divine energies (see section 4.3), the theophanies of God in his glory have a visible character and become manifest as visions of light. In Third Isaiah (Isa 56–66), for instance, Zion is called upon to prepare for the breaking forth of the divine light (*'or*) into darkness, which will make Jerusalem itself a source of light and manifest God's glory (Isa 60:1–3). Yet the appearance of the light of God is conditional upon social justice and moral behaviour: 'if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday' (Isa 58:10; cf. 58:6–9).

There is also a cultic-sacral dimension to *kavod*. According to the Priestly tradition, Yahweh's glory comes to indwell the tabernacle (after its consecration), the portable sanctuary used by Israel on its journey through the wilderness (Exod 40:34–38). Likewise, Yahweh's *kavod* fills the temple after the ark of the covenant is brought into the holy of holies, thus legitimizing the building as a genuine place of worship (1 Kgs 8:1–13). In Ezekiel, there is a renewed emphasis on the mobility of the divine glory, echoing the premonarchic period. Yahweh's *kavod* leaves the holy of holies and the temple and moves toward Babylon, where Israel lives in exile (Ezek 9:3; 10:4; 11:23). This is not to say that the presence of God's glory is always locally restricted. Like the divine energies, the *kavod* of God is often viewed as universally present. In Isaiah's throne vision in the temple, one of the seraphs calls to another saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isa 6:3). Here the glory of God denotes his mighty and salvific deeds in history as well as his atoning actions that restore true life before God (de Vries 2016: 149–150).

Finally, Old Testament scholars have pointed out that the experience of God's glory is always mediated (de Vries 2016: 128). There are again interesting parallels to the Greek divine energies. As seen above, the divine *kavod* is God relating himself to his creation

and not a lower or secondary deity. As Brevard Childs puts it, '[God's] glory is his disclosed holiness; his holiness is his inner glory […]' (Childs 2001: 55). The experience of God's glory is an encounter with God himself. It is not that *kavod* mediates God, for *kavod is* God, but creaturely signs – both natural (e.g. cloud, fire) and cultural (e.g. tabernacle, temple) – mediate *kavod* and thus also God himself. Without *kavod*, God's presence would not be perceptible in creation. In Exodus, God's glory appears in a (fiery) cloud that leads Israel through the wilderness (Exod 16:10; 40:34–38). In Exod 3:2–6, God appears to Moses in a burning bush, though his glory is not explicitly mentioned here. In the central theophany on Mount Sinai, where Moses is given the Law, God appears in the cloud and in the fire (Exod 19:16–18; 24:15–18).

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the term energeia occurs only in the deuterocanonical books (see Wis 7:17.26; 13:4; 18:22; 2 Macc 3:24; 3:29; 3 Macc 4:21). The most interesting verse is Wis 7:26, where the divine Wisdom is called 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God (*theou energeias*), and an image of his goodness'. This connection between the divine Wisdom and God's working or operation (*energeia*) in creation was latter developed in the Russian school of Sophiology (Bulgakov 1993).

3.2 *Energeia/energein* in the New Testament

There is no full-fledged doctrine of the divine energies in the New Testament, at least not as it is later found in Greek patristic and Byzantine thought. However, the noun *energeia* and the verb *energein* occur quite frequently, particularly in the letters of Paul.

In the Pauline corpus and the gospels, the noun *energeia* is used in the following passages: Eph 1:19–20; 3:7; 4:16; Phil 3:21; Col 1:29; Col 2:12; 2 Thess 2:9, 11.

The active verbal form *energein* occurs in: Matt 14:2; 1 Cor 12:6; 10–11; Gal 2:8; 3:5; Eph 1:11, 20; Eph 2:2; Phil 2:12–13.

And the middle/passive use of the same verb, *energeisthai*, is used in: Rom 7:5; 2 Cor 1:6; 2 Cor 4:12; Gal 5:6; Eph 3:20; Col 1:29; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 2:7; Jas 5:16.

The similarity between certain New Testament writings and the later essence-energy distinction in Byzantine theology is not limited to the use of the same terminology: there are also interesting theological affinities (Bradshaw 2006a). Exegetical and philological analysis reveals a remarkable continuity between certain key ideas in Paul's letters and later developments in Greek patristic thought. As David Bradshaw has observed, in the New Testament *energeia* and *energein* are only used of supernatural agents such as God, demons, or Satan, which is an innovation compared to pre-Christian writings. Furthermore, Bradshaw argues that the verb form *energeisthai* should be read as passive, rather than middle, and is thus best translated as 'to be made operative or effective' (Bradshaw 2006a:

212). This seems to contradict the fact that most English translations prefer the middle voice. However, Bradshaw provides evidence that, in the extra-biblical literature as well as in the church fathers, *energesthai* is always in passive voice (Bradshaw 2006a: 203–209).

This raises the issue of why the question about the middle or passive voice is of theological importance. One of the examples discussed by Bradshaw is Gal 5:6: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working (*energoumenē*) through love' (NRSV). The participle *energoumenē* is here interpreted as middle voice, in line with most Protestant scholarship that is critical of a synergistic reading of this passage (Bradshaw 2006a: 210–211). The question Paul seeks to answer is how we are to understand faith that justifies (see Gal 5:5), and particularly the relationship between faith and love. If *energoumenē* is read as passive, the meaning changes: faith must be actuated or energized by love. In other words, it is a synergistic understanding of divine and human agency. The main idea underlying this interpretation of Gal 5:6 is that the Holy Spirit actualizes or energizes a latent potency, namely the faith of the believer. Synergy is conceived of as the cooperation of the human person exercising faith and the divine power that makes this faith effective (Bradshaw 2006a: 211–214).

This reading enables us to understand divine-human cooperation and synergism while safeguarding the ontological difference between divine and human agency. As Bradshaw clarifies, God both imparts energy and calls it forth or activates it (Bradshaw 2006a: 214). In line with the above translation of *energesthai* as 'to be made operative or effective', the meaning of the active form, *energein*, would be '*to be active in a way that imparts energy or calls forth from a potency already present*' (Bradshaw 2006a: 216, original emphasis). Accordingly, the participle *energoumenos* means 'to receive an energy' (Bradshaw 2006a: 191).

In the Deutero-Pauline corpus, the terms *energeia* and *energein* occur in connection with a proto-trinitarian understanding of the divine economy. Furthermore, the two central Aristotelian concepts *energeia* and *dynamis* are used in conjunction to express the actualization (*energeia*) of the divine power (*dynamis*) in Jesus Christ, for the salvation of humankind (Renczes 2003: 92–93). The following passage from the letter to the Ephesians combines both aspects:

> I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him […] so that […] you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power (*dynameōs*) for us who believe, according to the working [or actualization] (*kata tēn energeian*) of his great power. God put this power to work (*enērgēsen*) in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places […]. (Eph 1:17–20)

In the same letter, the author writes that he has become a servant of the gospel, 'according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working [or actualization] of his power (*kata tēn energeian tēs dynameōs autou*)' (Eph 3:7).

Energeia can also express the efficacy of the sacramental grace of baptism, or the eschatological actualization of the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection in the human being:

> […W]hen you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power (*energeias*) of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:12)

> He [i.e. Christ] will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power (*kata tēn energeian*) that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Phil 3:21)

In these two passages, the translation of *energeia* as power is appropriate, though the author clearly has in mind actualized power, rather than power as potentiality.

3.3 The transfiguration of Christ

The New Testament pericopes of the transfiguration do not use the terminology of energy (*energeia*) and essence (*ousia*). Yet this narrative, found in all three Synoptic Gospels, is probably the most-cited New Testament text in theological writings and homilies about deification and the divine energies in the Greek East (Daley 2013; McGuckin 1986). The Feast of the Transfiguration, celebrated in the Eastern Church on the sixth of August, recalls the transformative power of the divine light that shone forth from Christ on Mount Tabor. The transfiguration is seen as an epiphany that reveals Christ's true identity. It anticipates his resurrection and paschal victory and prepares the three disciples who witness this epiphany for the horrors of Christ's crucifixion. In line with the theology of the Greek East, the divine glory is not viewed as something that Christ's body receives from outside, but as proceeding from within. Christology and soteriology are closely intertwined. Christ has 'changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness He has made it godlike' (Ware and Mother Mary 1998: 469). Incarnation and transfiguration have laid the foundation for the deification of human beings and the cosmos.

Another liturgical key theme is the foreshadowing of the appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. Referring to Moses and Elijah, Christ is worshipped as 'the maker and the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets' (Ware and Mother Mary 1998: 476). Furthermore, scripture readings from Exodus and 1 and 2 Kings remind the worshipping community that in the Old Testament the visibility of God was incomplete. Moses wanted to see the one who was speaking to him openly, but was only granted to look upon God's back part. Only

in the last times, on the mountain of the Transfiguration, was his wish fulfilled to see the face of God in the incarnate Christ (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.20.9; 1979: 490).

In the biblical commentaries of some of the later church fathers, the essence-energy distinction is used to interpret the experience of the divine light on Mount Tabor. As Maximus the Confessor points out, the 'dazzling rays of light from the Lord's face, completely overwhelming the power of their eyes, was a symbol of His divinity, which transcends intellect, sensation, being, and knowledge' (*Ambiguum* [*Amb.*] 10, *PG* 91:1128A; Maximus the Confessor 2014: 191 [vol. 1]). The divine light shining forth from Christ's face and his garments is identified with the divine energy or operation, which inexhaustibly reveals his divinity, i.e. God's essence.

In the homilies of the fourteenth-century theologian Gregory Palamas, the narrative of the transfiguration is interpreted in the context of the so-called hesychast controversy (see section 4.3). His main pastoral aim is to clarify the precise nature of the divine light experienced by the three disciples on the mountain of the transfiguration. The light of the transfiguration is not created and physical, but uncreated, supernatural, and uncircumscribed – even if its appearance to the disciples occurred in a short period of time and was spatially restricted to the mountaintop (*Homily* 34.8; Daley 2013: 360). Christ did not assume anything that he was not before, nor was he changed into something he had not been before, but revealed to his disciples what he was. It was not Christ but the disciples that underwent change. Their blindness was overcome because he enabled them to see 'with eyes transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Homily* 34.13; Daley 2013: 364).

It is again the essence-energy distinction that serves as the hermeneutical key to the correct interpretation of the pericope of the transfiguration. As Palamas points out, it would be erroneous to believe that the disciples perceived the divine substance, for angels and human beings receive the light from the divine source and can only participate in God's glory by grace. Only the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit 'share the glory and the kingdom by their nature' (*Homily* 35.15; Daley 2013: 375). While the divine glory and light is given by measure, depending on the merit of the one who receives it, yet without being divided, God's substance is completely beyond conception and does not admit of more or less (*Homily* 35.17; Daley 2013: 377).

4 The essence-energy distinction in Greek patristic and Byzantine thought

4.1 The Cappadocians

The main theological contribution of the Cappadocians – Basil the Great (330–379), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389) – was the

distinction between the one divine essence and the three hypostases that informed the theological decisions of the Second Ecumenical Council (381 CE). They argued that the distinction between the hypostasis of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit does not divide God's activity *ad extra*, which the three persons always perform jointly. The divine activity (*energeia*) proceeds from God's entire essence (*ousia*) or nature (*physis*), although every hypostasis fulfils a specific function in the divine acts of self-manifestation. On the level of the divine economy (*oikonomia*),

> every operation (*energeia*) which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from (*ek*) the Father, and proceeds through (*dia*) the Son, and is perfected in (*en*) the Holy Spirit. (Gregory of Nyssa, *On 'Not Three Gods'*; 1979a: 334)

On the intra-trinitarian level (*theologia*), the Father is the cause or origin of the second and the third hypostasis: the Son is begotten (*gennētos*) of the unbegotten (*agennētos*) Father, and the Holy Spirits proceeds (*ekporeuetai*) from the Father. This is not to say that the Son is ontologically subordinated to the Father, or the Holy Spirit to the Son. Unlike Eunomius, the Cappadocians teach that the three hypostases have one common divine essence (*ousia*), nature (*physis*), and deity (*theotēs*). All three hypostases of the Trinity are co-eternal and co-equal, but have their specific identifying characteristics (*gnōristikai idiotētes*).

The Cappadocians strongly emphasize the simplicity and indivisibility of the divine essence (Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* II.12.475). Accordingly, some scholars argue that the distinction between the divine essence and energy in Gregory of Nyssa should not be interpreted in terms of an ontological difference, for this would introduce composition into God (Renczes 2003: 115–116). Moreover, according to the Cappadocians' notion of deification (*theōsis*), believers become 'God by grace', by participating in the uncreated divine energies. Reflecting on the different meanings of the phrase 'in (*en*) the Holy Spirit', Basil of Caesarea writes about the diachronic indwelling of the *energeia* of the Holy Spirit in the believer. While the grace of the Spirit is continuously present, it must be synergistically actualized by the recipient to be effective and bring spiritual fruits, such as prophecies and healings. It follows from this that the divine *energeia* bestowed by the Holy Spirit can be present in the believer both potentially and in an actualized state (*On the Holy Spirit* 61; 1895b: 38–39; see Bradshaw 2004: 173).

Apart from the simplicity and indivisibility of the divine essence, the Cappadocians also maintain its inaccessibility. They explain that humans can only know God's attributes such as his greatness, his power, his wisdom, or his goodness, which become manifest through the energies, and not God's essence itself. Basil of Caesarea writes that God's 'operations [*energeiai*] come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach' (*Letter* 234;

1895a: 274), and Gregory of Nazianzus confirms that ‘no one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature (*physis*) and essence (*ousia*)’ (*Oratio* 28.17; Gregory of Nazianzus 2002: 49).

Some commentators see here a problematic Neoplatonic influence that precipitated a certain disjunction between *oikonomia* – God’s enactment of the plan of salvation in creation – and *theologia* – the divine life ‘in itself’ (Renczes 2003: 117; LaCugna 1991: 69–73). Refuting Arian and Eunomian subordinationism, the Cappadocians insisted on the consubstantiality and coequality of the three hypostases. Yet, as a result, these commentators argue, the intra-trinitarian relationships and the inaccessibility of the divine essence took precedence over the divine economy – a development that also gradually impacted the liturgical texts of the church. In earlier doxological formulas, praise was given to the Father through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, indicating their specific function in the divine economy – as mentioned above. Later doxologies, however, emphasized the equality of the three persons and thus directed praise to the Father *and* the Son *and* the Holy Spirit (LaCugna 1991: 111–135; Jungmann 1989: 172–190).

4.2 Maximus the Confessor

Maximus the Confessor’s (c. 580–662) understanding of the essence-energy distinction builds mainly upon Dionysius the Areopagite and the Cappadocians. In Maximus’ writings, the concept of *energeia* is of central importance with respect to the doctrine of God, Christology, cosmology, and anthropology. Energy does not have a hypostatic character but ontologically belongs to the essence or nature, which is common in beings that belong to the same genus (*Amb.* 23, *PG* 91:1261A; Maximus the Confessor 2014: 9 [vol. 2]). Regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, this means that there is one common essence and one common energy but three hypostases.

Maximus was a leading figure in the theological struggle against imperially imposed monoenergism and monotheletism, which taught that Christ had only one energy and one will (Blowers 2016: 42–54). He argued that, following the doctrine of the two natures of Christ established at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon (451 CE), there must also be two energies and two wills in Christ. Maximus writes that

> […] because His divine energy was humanized through its ineffable union with the natural energy of the flesh, He completed the plan of salvation on our behalf […but] the union, by excluding division, does not impair the distinction. (*Amb.* 5, *PG* 91:1056B–D; Maximus the Confessor 2014: 51 [vol. 1])

Both God and human beings, the uncreated and the created, possess a ‘natural energy’ through which the nature/essence expresses and manifests itself.

According to Maximus, Jesus Christ is the ‘beginning’, ‘middle’, and ‘end’ of all created beings. This triad corresponds to several other triads that he uses to set out his Christian metaphysics. As beginning, God is the ‘creator’, as middle the ‘provider’, and as end the ‘goal’ of creation (*Chapters on Knowledge* I.10; Maximus the Confessor 1985: 130). Maximus refers to the same three aspects of divine activity (*energeia*) when he differentiates between ‘being’, ‘well-being’, and ‘eternal-being’. It is the one God who endows us with being, guides and directs our movement to him (well-being), and accomplishes our deification by grace (eternal-being) (*Amb.* 7, *PG* 91:1076B–C; 2014: 89–91 [vol. 1]; *Amb.* 10, *PG* 91:1116B; 2014: 167–169 [vol. 1]). While God as Creator is always active (*kat’ energeian*), creatures must realize the potency (*dynamis*) that was given to them by God. That is to say, the potency (*dynamis*) that inheres in the essence (*ousia*) of created beings must be turned into actuality (*energeia*; *Amb.* 7, *PG* 91:1081A; Maximus the Confessor 2014: 99–101 [vol. 1]; *Chapters on Knowledge* 1.3; Maximus the Confessor 1985: 129). The divine energies actualize the human nature, which is always already directed to the divine *telos*. God is not only the creator and preserver of creatures, but also effects their movement towards God, and their fulfilment.

The distribution and reception of the divine energies takes place analogically and synergistically. Created beings are many and therefore also different, and God’s infinite energies are present in each of them, according to the divinely-instituted ‘natural principles’ (*logoi*) that determine their essences. All *logoi* of beings are rooted in the one *Logos*, the Word of God. God is wholly present in each of his energies, without losing his indivisible simplicity (Larchet 2010: 396). Furthermore, God’s energy is present in creatures in proportion to the receptive capacity of the human recipient; in proportion to a person’s measure of faith and disposition of the soul (*Amb.* 22, *PG* 91:1256D–1257C; Maximus the Confessor 2014: 449–451 [vol. 1]; *Ad Thal.* 29 *CCSG* 7:211; Maximus the Confessor 2018: 196–197). Synergism between God and human beings takes place in the middle phase of Maximus’ metaphysical triads, where ‘being’ is qualified as ‘well-being’. The reception of the divine energies requires an active response on the part of the human recipient and enables the believer to (re)direct his ‘faculty of judging’ (*gnomē*) by acquiring a particular habitus (*hexis*). In this dialogical encounter with God, a person’s ‘mode of existence’ comes to realize the underlying ‘natural principle’ (*logos physeōs*), which is fixed and inalterable.

Deification, the becoming of God by grace by participating in the uncreated divine energies, cannot be realized individually, but only ecclesially and eucharistically (Loudovikos 2010: 195–210). Communion with God, and the dynamic actualization of ‘being’ as ‘well-being’ and ‘eternal being’, is concomitant with the realization of

interpersonal communion. In the Eucharist, all people, despite their cultural, linguistic, and educational differences, and despite their different ages, appearances, characters, opinions and skills, are gathered and unified in the one *Logos*, Jesus Christ, yet without loss of integrity and without confusion (*Mystagogy* I: Maximus the Confessor 1985: 186–188). 'Being' for Maximus is thus realized as 'becoming-in-communion'. The individual believer's love of God and her movement towards God are integrated into the Eucharistic community. Only in the divine Eucharist is ontologically real incorporation of the Christian into the body of Christ possible.

4.3 Gregory Palamas

Particularly in the West, the essence-energy distinction is primarily associated with the late Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas (1296–1357). While the basic features of this doctrine clearly predate Palamas by centuries, scholars still investigate how Palamas' interpretation of this doctrine refers to that of earlier Byzantine and patristic authors. There are two distinct but interrelated issues: first, there is the historical question about the degree of continuity and discontinuity between Palamas and his predecessors; and second, there is the theological question of how to evaluate Palamas' interpretation or development of this doctrine.

In the course of the controversy that was stirred up at the time of Palamas, theological reflection about the essence-energy distinction intensified, resulting in a deeper understanding of the underlying key issues. Like earlier Greek patristic authors, Palamas resorted to this doctrine to conceive of the divine presence, the real presence of God in creation, without impairing the divine transcendence. The debates mainly revolved around the question of the precise ontological status of the divine energy and its relationship to the divine essence. Moreover, the question of the theologically appropriate use of pre-Christian philosophical concepts and ideas, the question of the relationship between philosophical and theological knowledge, gained renewed attention.

The Palamite controversy originated in the context of hesychast spirituality on Mount Athos. The historical roots of hesychasm, derived from the Greek word *hesychia*, 'stillness', can be traced back to the emerging monasticism, particularly the anchorite way of life in fourth-century Egypt and Palestine. Building on the spiritual experience of Evagrius Ponticus, Macarius the Great, Diadochus of Photice, John Climacus, and many other ascetics, hesychasm centres on the repetition of the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner'. The highest goal of the hesychast is to reach a state of unceasing prayer, purification from sin, transformation of the passions, and union with God (Stăniloae 2003). Palamas and his contemporaries were mainly concerned about the correct theological interpretation of the visions of divine light experienced by the monks, which they identified with the light that shone forth from Christ's

countenance at the transfiguration on Mount Tabor (see section 3.3). The doctrine of the divine energies was used as a conceptual tool to theologically interpret these mystical visions of God.

According to most contemporary scholars, Gregory Palamas was not a radical innovator who brought about a ground-breaking paradigm change in Byzantine theology. Rather, his work is seen as a creative synthesis of the many different but overlapping concepts and ideas used in connection with the doctrine of the divine energies in earlier centuries (Bradshaw 2004: 241; Loudovikos 2013: 124; Russell 2019: 210; Tollefsen 2012: 185). The debates into which he was drawn by his opponents, most notably Barlaam, Akindynos, and Gregoras, advanced theological reflection on the doctrine of the divine energies. What is to some extent new in Palamas' work, according to Norman Russell, is the emphasis on the personal experience of divine grace in contemplative prayer realizable in this life. Palamas even goes so far as to say that the saints who have achieved deification by grace become 'wholly one with God' (*homotheoi*) – an expression the church fathers used christologically to talk about the deified body of Christ (*On Divine Energies* 36; Palamas 1966b: 121–122 [vol. 2]; Russell 2006: 357, 370 note 52). Palamas' understanding of deification through participation in the uncreated divine energies remains fully embedded in the liturgical, sacramental, and hierarchical life of the church.

Palamas explains that the saints participate in the 'whole of God', not in his essence but in his energies, for otherwise they would become gods by nature (*Triads* III.3.8; Palamas 1973: 709–711 [vol. 2]). He points out that the divine essence and energy are not identical and (following Dionysius the Areopagite) a distinction must be drawn between the imparticipable (*amethekton*) which is the divine essence, the participable (*methekton*) which is the divine energy, and that which participates (*metechon*), which is created beings. The divine energies mediate between the one uncreated divine essence and the plurality of created participating beings (*Triads* III.2.25; Palamas 1973: 686–688 [vol. 2]). What remains to be defined is the precise relationship between the imparticipable (the divine essence) and the participable (the divine energy).

In one of his letters, addressed to Akindynos, Palamas distinguishes between the 'superior essence' (*huperkeimenē ousia*) and the 'lower divinity' (*theotēs hupheimenē*), and uses the latter expression to refer to the divine energy and the gift of deification (*Third Letter to Akindynos*, section 15; Palamas 1966c: 306–307 [vol. 1]). His opponents viewed this theologically ambiguous passage as an epitome of his ditheism (*150 Chapters*, section 147; Palamas 1988: 252–253) and interpreted it in terms of a (Neoplatonic) hierarchy of divine beings, consisting of 'lower' and 'higher' deities. (There are historical, exegetical, and editorial questions about this passage, which has a slightly different meaning in different versions of the letter.) In this letter, Palamas in fact reacts to a lost treatise by Barlaam, who accused him of dividing God into a 'higher' and a 'lower' deity. In his

response, Palamas excludes ditheism and a crude ontological subordinationism (Pino 2022: 138–143). Throughout his entire work, he insists that the essence-energy distinction does not undermine the simplicity of God (Plested 2019).

The main theological and philosophical question is how Palamas conceived of the distinction between essence and energy (Bradshaw 2023: 81–117). There are contemporary scholars who identify a real distinction (*distinctio realis*) between the divine essence and energy in Palamas' writings. Some see this position as theologically convincing and inevitable (Meyendorff 1983: 186–188), others as problematic because it impairs the divine simplicity (Demetracopoulos 2011: 272–280). A third group of commentators argues that the expression 'real distinction' does not capture Palamas' main theological intention (Tollefsen 2012: 198), and either regard the essence-energy distinction as a notional distinction (*kat' epinoian*) (Loudovikos 2013) or as a conceptual distinction with an ontological foundation (*distinctio rationis cum fundamento in re*; Lévy 2012; Russell 2019: 183). Yet others see a certain similarity between the essence-energy distinction and Duns Scotus' formal distinction (Bradshaw 2023: 116; Milbank 2013; Spencer 2017: 130, note 30). The comparison between Palamas and Scotus is not new but goes back to Gennadios Scholarios (1400–c. 1473; Kapriev 2018).

Some of the passages in Palamas' work that emphasize the difference between essence and energy precisely exclude an ontological subordination of the energies. For instance, Palamas argues that if the Father is greater than the Son (cf. John 14:28), despite the fact that the Son possesses his own hypostasis (*authypostatos*) and is of one essence with the Father (*homoousios*), all the more will the essence be superior to the energy (*On the Divine Energies*, section 19; Palamas 1966b: 111 [vol. 2]). In other words, Palamas sees a certain similarity between the way the Father is the cause (*aitia*) of the Son, and the way the essence is the cause of the energy. The notion of the monarchy of the Father in Greek patristic trinitarian thought is complex and has very little to do with what is normally understood by cause and causality (Loudovikos 2011: 688–696; see also Bulgakov 2004: 134–137). What is clear is that Palamas seeks to find a model of 'difference-in-unity' that avoids a crude ontological subordinationism.

According to Palamas, the most fundamental difference between the Father-Son relationship and the essence-energy distinction is that the energy does not exist as an independent reality (*kat' heauto*), i.e. it is not self-subsistent. Unlike the Son, the energy does not possess a hypostasis of its own (*authypostatos*). Nor is it anhypostatic (*anhypostatos*), for this term denotes non-being or illusionary being, or things of fleeting existence such as uttered words and the ever-changing atmospheric conditions. Palamas calls the uncreated divine light enhypostatic (*enhypostatos*) to underline first its reality, permanence, and stability, and second its ontological dependence on a hypostasis in which it has its existence (*Triads* III.1.9; 17–18; Palamas 1973: 572–573 [vol. 2]). In the

eighth century, John of Damascus had used the term *enhypostatos* to conceive of the assumption of Christ's human nature by the hypostasis of God the Word (*The Fount of Knowledge*, section 44; John of Damascus 1999: 68–69). In Palamas, the divine energy is enhypostatic in the sense that it pertains to the divine nature of Christ, and to the divinity or essence of the entire Trinity (*Triads* III 1.12, 19; Palamas 1973: 580–582, 592–594 [vol. 2]). In his later writings, however, the meaning of the term *enhypostatos* changes and comes to denote self-subsistence (*authypostatos*). Accordingly, it is no longer used to characterize the divine energies (Pino 2022: 152–155).

Palamas insists that, although God's essence surpasses the energy 'to the extent that the subject of an action (*to energoun*) surpasses its object (*to energoumenos*)', God is nonetheless 'entirely manifest in every energy' (*Triads* III 2, 9–10; Palamas 1973: 658–662 [vol. 2]; *150 Chapters*, section 75). As he writes:

> But since God is entirely (*holon*) present in each of the divine energies, 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 (*holos*) in each without any division at all; and how could each provide Him with a name and manifest Him entirely (*holos*), thanks to indivisible and supernatural simplicity, if He did not transcend all these energies? (*Triads* III.2.7; Palamas 1973: 656–657 [vol. 2])

In this quotation, Palamas does not simply distinguish between a part of God that is inaccessible and imparticipable and a part that is accessible and participable. Rather, in the above passage, the theological rationale underlying the essence-energy distinction could be articulated as follows: the transcendent essence is envisaged as the condition of possibility of God's unreserved self-giving in his energies. God does not remain hidden in the sense that his self-giving is somehow restricted. His indivisible and supernatural simplicity is the precondition that God can manifest himself without reserve while remaining transcendent.

Furthermore, in Palamas, the Aristotelian differentiation between *dynamis* (potentiality, capacity) and *energeia* (actuality, activity) takes on a new meaning. In his writings, *dynamis* and *energeia* are viewed as synonyms and denote the power of God that is eternally and unceasingly active, but not always manifest in the creaturely sphere (*On Divine Energies* 23; Palamas 1966b: 113–114 [vol. 2]). In other words, God's *energeia*/*dynamis*, his inherent and essential power, is distinguished from his activities (*energeiai*) *ad extra*, through which this power becomes manifest in time (Pino 2022: 94–99). The term *energeia* thus has a double meaning. But Palamas insists that even *energeia* understood as essential power of God is not an unrealized potentiality prior to God's use of this power, since God is active from all eternity (*150 Chapters* section 140; Palamas 1988: 244–245). Consequently, when Palamas talks about the beginning or end of the divine energies, he refers to the manifestation of these energies in space and time,

and not to the energies as a pre-eternal power (*Antirrhetics* 6.20.75; Palamas 1966a: 442–443 [vol. 3]; Pino 2022: 91–94). Palamas calls the internal energies also natural or inherent attributes of God (*prosonta*), or divine predicates, properties, or idioms (Pino 2022: 65–67).

5 The divine energies in modern Orthodox theology

After the canonization of Gregory Palamas in 1368, critiques of the essence-energy distinction were almost exclusively articulated by Roman Catholic theologians. On the Eastern Orthodox side, authors such as Mark Eugenikos (d. 1445), Gennadios Scholarios (d. 1456), Damaskinos the Studite (d. 1577), Nikephoros Melissenos (d. 1653), George Koressios (d. 1653), and Sevastos Kymenitis (d. 1702) continued to write on this doctrine. Moreover, Dositheos of Jerusalem (d. 1707) and Nikodemos the Hagiorite (d. 1809) undertook to publish Palamas' writings (Pino 2022: 11–13; Russell 2019: 24–32). While theological reflection on Palamas and the essence-energy distinction never completely ceased in the Greek East, it did not play a central role for a long time. For several centuries, Orthodox theology was heavily influenced by Western theological categories and ideas. The essence-energy distinction, apophatic theology, and deification (*theōsis*) were no longer regarded as pivotal teachings in Eastern Orthodoxy. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that renewed interest in this doctrine and the work of Gregory Palamas occurred (Ladouceur 2019: 98–105). Important impulses for the revival of this doctrine came from the severe criticism of Palamite theology by several Roman Catholic theologians in the 1920s and 1930s (see section 7.3). This criticism, and the subsequent attempt by Orthodox theologians to articulate a defence of this doctrine, elicited intensive reflection on the identity of Orthodox theology and spirituality. Many Orthodox thinkers came to argue that the theology of Gregory Palamas, apophaticism, and the essence-energy distinction were indispensable for a genuine understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy (see section 5.2). In Russian Religious Thought, the essence-energy distinction was primarily discussed in the wake of the Name-Glorifier (*imiaslavie*) controversy which broke out in 1912 (see section 5.1).

5.1 Russian Religious Thought

The debate about the Name-Glorifiers (*imiaslavie*) ensued at the beginning of the twentieth century on Mount Athos, in the wake of the publication of a book with the title *In the Mountains of the Caucasus* (*Na Gorakh Kavkaza*, 1907 [2018]; Kenworthy 2020; Alfeyev 2007). Its author, Schemamonk Ilarion, expressed the controversial view that the name of God invoked in the Jesus Prayer was 'God himself'. The controversy caused enormous ecclesial and political turmoil, but also prompted prolonged and profound theological and philosophical reflection on the sacramental character of language, the real presence of God, and philosophical realism. Leading Russian religious thinkers such as Pavel

Florensky (1882–1937), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), and Aleksei Losev (1893–1988) defended the Name-Glorifiers by drawing on the Byzantine essence-energy distinction. They used this doctrine to elucidate the (real) presence of God in his name(s), yet without succumbing to an idolatrous identification of the created with the uncreated.

The Russian thinkers elaborated on the insights of the Byzantine tradition in several respects. They analysed in what way the human act of naming God is at once different and inseparable from the divine energy, and they drew a distinction between two categories of names, the names of God in the plural (1), and the proper name of God – JEHOVA in the Old Testament, and Jesus Christ in the New Testament (2).

(1) As far as the names of God are concerned, the divine energies act in human beings and unite themselves with human energy, thus enabling us to name God, to assign predicates to him such as Providence, Creator, Good, Eternal, Blessed, etc. Bulgakov understands the divine subject as transcendent-immanent. Every theophanic self-revelation of God manifests, in and through human beings, a new predicate of God, but no predicate can exhaustively describe the transcendent divine subject (Bulgakov 2012: 115–116). All the names and predicates assigned to God are at once anthropomorphic, in the sense that they belong to the creaturely and cosmic sphere, and of divine origin. Bulgakov interprets the divine names as ‘verbal icons’. Like the icon, the names of God become bearers of divine power, but the sign vehicle, the physical or material form of the sign, retains its heterogeneity with regard to the spiritual divine presence (Bulgakov 2012: 123–126).

(2) To understand the sacramental presence of God in the Jesus Prayer in the proper name ‘Jesus Christ’, it does not suffice to solely pay attention to the phoneme, which is the acoustic body of the name. While there is only one saviour whom we address in prayer, there are different phonemes in different languages: ‘Isus’ (Russian), ‘Jesus’ (English), ‘Iesous’ (Greek) etc. On their own, sounds like Jesus, Ivan, or Peter are mere words, predicates without a subject. It is the name qua ‘syneme’ that constitutes it as a proper name and that brings out its uniqueness and unrepeatability. Although there is a general dimension to all names, even proper names, for no proper name is completely unique, the proper name’s actual character only becomes manifest when it is assigned to a specific person. Due to the ‘properness’ of a proper name, the name’s verbal meaning and its etymological roots lose their significance. The proper name no longer serves as a predicate that tells us something about the subject. Rather, the proper name has a pronominal function that refers to its bearer, and this bearer can only be identified via its genealogy, its ‘narrative identity’, which is completely unique and unrepeatable (Bulgakov 2012: 153–158, 172–174). Put differently, in the proper name there is a fusion of the subject and the predicate, the name and the named. Bulgakov even goes so far as to liken the proper name of God, Jesus Christ, to the Eucharist. As the bread and wine are

transubstantiated ‘fully and to the end *under the form* of bread and wine’, so also in the proper name of God, Jesus Christ, the natural element is swallowed up by the divine (Bulgakov 2012: 133, original emphasis; see also 1993: 63).

The danger of an idolatrous immanentism that disregards the fundamental difference between the created and the uncreated is averted by underlining the irreversibility of the Name-Glorifiers’ assertion that ‘the Name of God is himself’. Florensky argues that it is indeed true that ‘*[t]he name of God is God and exactly God Himself* […]’. But, he remarks, this statement is only theologically legitimate in connection with another phrase that emphasizes God’s transcendence: ‘[…] *but God is neither His name, nor His Very Name*’ (Florensky 2000: 269, original emphases). The name of God reveals and manifests the divine essence. It is more than itself because it is God himself. Yet there is an apophatic reserve and an important asymmetry, because God’s essence cannot be reduced to his name. While God is being revealed and known in his name, he does not lose his transcendence and reality, and is not exhaustively known in his name. The divine nature cannot be identified with the nature of any divine name, not even with God’s proper name (Florensky 2000: 270).

Contemporary research on *imiaslavie* and the philosophical and theological reflection that ensued in its wake investigates the Russian reception and development of the Byzantine essence-energy distinction. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev has argued that further research is required to clarify the Orthodox position on the questions raised by the ‘Name-Glorifier’ conflict (Alfeyev 2007). Some commentators see a fundamental difference between Palamite thought and the Russian approach to *imiaslavie*, and question the latter’s theological legitimacy (Hagemeister 2009). Other scholars relate the Russian theories of language to Western, Continental, and analytic philosophy of language (Gurko 2009; Schneider 2019). The Russian religious thinkers did not limit the discussion about *imiaslavie* to the hesychast controversies in the fourteenth century. Rather, they widened the debate and used their understanding of the essence-energy distinction to set out a realist philosophy of language that questioned the dominance of nominalism in Western modern philosophy (see section 7).

5.2 Twentieth and twenty-first century Orthodox theology

The Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993) was one of the pioneers of Palamas research in the twentieth century. When his book *The Life and Work of St. Gregory Palamas* appeared in 1938 in Romanian, no major study existed on this Byzantine thinker apart from two publications by Gregorios Papamichael (1911) and Basil Krivocheine (1938) (Agachi 2013: 38–58). Stăniloae’s work not only filled a gap in historical research on hesychast mysticism and the Palamite essence-energy distinction but also initiated a renewal of Orthodox theology. Dissatisfied with the abstract scholastic

approach to theology that in his view had penetrated much of modern Orthodox theology, Stăniloae's aim was to take seriously the existential and spiritual questions of his time. For him, the Hesychast controversy was the most important event in the history of Orthodox theology after the patristic era, and manifested the irreconcilable differences between Western scholasticisms and authentic Orthodox theology and spirituality (Agachi 2013: 39). In the first volume of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (1998 [English translation]), published almost forty years after his study on Palamas, Stăniloae reflects on the interdependence and complementarity of cataphatic and apophatic theology. According to him, the Western *via negativa* is restricted to intellectual negation that counterbalances affirmative statements about God, whereas in the oriental tradition apophatic theology is a direct experience of God (Stăniloae 1998: 96; 2003: 230–254). While the essence of God remains beyond experience, we nonetheless perceive it as a personal reality and as the source of all our experiences. Apophaticism and the essence-energy distinction are not the expression of God's utter self-enclosure, but of his inexhaustibility and incomprehensibility (1998: 103–105).

The Russian émigré theologian Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) was one of the most important proponents of Neo-Palamism in the twentieth century (1991: 67–90; 1985: 45–69; 1983: 153–169). He was an ecumenically-minded theologian who had studied under Étienne Gilson and was close to the Catholic movement of *Nouvelle théologie* (New Theology). Yet he generally underlined the unique character of the mystical theology of the Eastern Orthodox tradition compared to the Latin West. Lossky's main interest was to spell out the theological significance of the essence-energy distinction, rather than the historical development of this doctrine. For him, the essence-energy distinction is 'an integral part of the tradition of the Eastern Church' (Lossky 1991: 71). It existed already in the first centuries of the church but was in this early stage expressed with less doctrinal precision. Accordingly, Palamism is not viewed as a theological innovation. Lossky sees the essence-energy distinction not as a 'purely intellectual distinction' but as a 'real distinction' (1991: 72, 76). At the same time, he denies that it entails 'any sort of division with the divine being' (1983: 157). Being aware of this apparent contradiction, he underlines the antinomic character of this doctrine (1991: 76).

John Meyendorff (1926–1992) studied in Paris at the Institute of St Sergius and at the Sorbonne before he moved to the United States to teach at St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary. He made a significant contribution to the exploration of the life and work of Gregory Palamas (Meyendorff 1959; 1964; 1974). Apart from historical and theological research on the hesychast controversy, he translated some of Palamas' writings into French, most notably his *Triads* (Palamas 1973). Theologically, Meyendorff found in Palamas' work 'a constructive answer to the challenge to Christianity of the Modern Age: a personalist and existential theology […]' (Meyendorff 1964: 240). He opposes Palamas' 'Christian existentialism' to the 'nominalist essentialism' of his adversaries, like Barlaam

and Akindynus, who rejected the essence-energy distinction as theologically problematic (1964: 211). Although Meyendorff did not find any historical evidence that Palamas' opponents were directly influenced by the Latin West, he nonetheless saw parallels between their conception of God and the theology of Thomas Aquinas (1964: 204). He presents Byzantine theology and Palamism as following a distinctly Eastern Orthodox methodology that differs from its Western counterpart (Meyendorff 1988).

Metropolitan John Zizioulas (1931–2023) is one of the few contemporary Orthodox theologians who has reservations about the doctrine of the divine energies (Zizioulas 2006: 29–30). For him, the 'unconfused union' between God and creation is realized through the second hypostasis of the Trinity, the Son, and thus has a hypostatic-personal character. Overemphasis on the role of the divine energies, he argues, diminishes the personal character of God's presence, for the divine energies belong to God's nature and to all three persons of the Trinity. Yet in Greek patristic theology, Zizioulas remarks, it is the incarnate *Logos* that bridges the gap between God and creation, and salvation and deification are accomplished through filial adoption.

6 The divine energies and modern Western philosophy

Some authors have used the doctrine of the divine energies to establish a dialogue between Orthodox theology and contemporary epistemology and ontology. The Greek philosopher Christos Yannaras (b. 1935), who studied in Greece, Bonn, and Paris, developed a sophisticated Orthodox 'personalist existentialism' by drawing on Heidegger's critique of ontotheology and Eastern Orthodox apophaticism (Russell 2013; Petrà 2019). He adopted Heidegger's view that the God of Western philosophy since Plato was a metaphysical construction and conceptual idol that could not be identified with the biblical God. The 'death of God' proclaimed by Nietzsche only concerned the God of a rationalist metaphysic, where the divine origin is conceived of as the logically necessary first cause of beings. Following Heidegger, Yannaras argues that the 'death of God' and the resulting nihilism can either lead to atheism or Christian apophaticism (Yannaras 2005). Under the influence of Vladimir Lossky and Dionysius the Areopagite, Yannaras uses the essence-energy distinction to elucidate knowledge of God as an existential experience, and as an event of personal relationship. 'God is known and participated through his uncreated energies, which are beyond the reach of the intellect, while in his essence he remains unknown and unparticipated' (Yannaras 2007: 64). Knowledge of God is only possible through his tripersonal ecstatic self-disclosure and self-offering. The essence becomes communicable and accessible through the person, which is its 'mode of existence', i.e. the essence or nature can only be known as the content of the person. Accordingly, Yannaras argues, in the Greek East we find an 'apophaticism of the person' rather than an 'apophaticism of the essence'. The latter approach, which, according to him, was

dominant in the Latin West, is motivated by the need to protect the divine essence from the conceptual grasp of the human intellect. Like many of his Orthodox colleagues, Yannaras views (his personalist interpretation of) the essence-energy distinction as the point of division between East and West. The West rejected the doctrine of the uncreated divine energies to safeguard the divine simplicity, and only allowed for a distinction between the divine essence and other created essences that exist as effects of the divine cause.

The essence-energy distinction was also used to develop a realist philosophy of language. According to Pavel Florensky, every being has an inner side that is turned towards itself – the essence – and an outer side that is directed toward another being – the energy. In the act of knowledge, the knowing subject and the known object are unified, yet retain their identity and independence (Florensky 2000: 255–257). The subject comes to know the object itself and not merely a concept or representation, though language plays a mediating role. An interpenetration or synergy occurs between the energy of the subject and the energy of the object, resulting in a new being that is more than just the sum of the energy of the subject and the energy of the object. This new being in the world is the word. On the one hand, the word is the speaker himself. The word manifests a person's activity immediately, and through this activity the person's hidden essence. On the other hand, the word is the external reality which it refers to. The word is not merely mirroring the object in the external world but enables the subject of knowledge to penetrate into the object's energy, which discloses its essence. Florensky argues that the word fulfils the function of a symbol. The symbol is a being that is always more than itself, for it expresses something that is not itself, something that is bigger than itself – but the symbol contains this other being and brings it to expression essentially.

There are interesting parallels between Florensky's interpretation of the essence-energy distinction and realist semiotics in the tradition of C. S. Peirce. Peirce's triadic understanding of semiosis distinguishes between object, sign, and interpretant. When we think about something, an object in the external world, the thoughts, images, or feelings that are present to our consciousness serve as signs that require interpretation by means of further signs, which Peirce calls interpretants. As in Florensky, the sign produced in the mind is the result of a kind of synergism between the knowing subject and the known object. Peirce uses the metaphor of a rainbow that is at once a manifestation of the rain and the sun. Everything that is present to our consciousness is on the one hand a 'phenomenal manifestation of ourselves', but also 'a phenomenon of something without us' (Peirce 1991: 67). A physical object existing in the environment can enter into a relation with a subject so that the subject becomes aware of it as an object. Accordingly, the object exists at once independently of the relation and in the relation. In the relation 'it *both* represents itself and *is* itself' (Deely 2001: 695, original emphases). Expressed in Florensky's idiom, the energy of the object's essence is the condition of possibility of its knowability by the subject and constitutes the foundation of the 'real relation' between the

mediating word-sign and the object. The energy of the knowing subject, however, stands for the aspect under which the object is perceived.

7 Ecumenical perspectives on the divine energies

The doctrine of the divine energies has prompted a lively ecumenical debate that is still ongoing. The origin of the dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Catholic theologians about the essence-energy distinction can be traced back to the late Byzantine period. More recently, leading Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic thinkers have analysed this doctrine from within their own ecclesial traditions and articulated a wide variety of different responses. So far, no ecumenical consensus has been reached about the essence-energy distinction, yet it is possible to distinguish between different groups of scholars who evaluate the ecumenical significance and potential of this doctrine in a similar way (Milbank 2013).

7.1 Exploring cross-denominational affinities

Some scholars see affinities between their own tradition and the Eastern Orthodox essence-energy distinction. The Neo-Calvinist thinker Roy Clouser argues that the works of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Karl Barth follow the same theological logic as the essence-energy distinction in the Cappadocian fathers (Clouser 2013). God possesses his attributes, which are also present in creation, in the divine energies or activities. These attributes are not identical with the divine essence. They are not unconditionally non-dependent like the essence, as Clouser puts it, but depend on the essence. However, they are uncreated in the sense that they are not ontologically distinct from their divine cause. Some attributes, Clouser points out, may be created in the sense that there was a time when they did not exist. Unlike the Cappadocians, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas problematically identified God's attributes or perfections with his being, thus disregarding the apophaticism that preserves God's transcendence.

Richard Flogaus's comparison between Luther's and Palamas' understandings of deification is a lot more cautious about establishing similarities between Protestant theology and the essence-energy distinction (Flogaus 1997). While Flogaus sees certain points of contact between the two theologians, he places the stress clearly on the differences. He explains that Luther's differentiation between the 'hidden God' (*Deus absconditus*) and the 'revealed God' (*Deus revelatus*) does not correspond to the Byzantine essence-energy distinction. According to Luther, even the revealed God in Jesus Christ (*Deus revelatus*) remains hidden in a very specific way. He reinterprets the medieval negative theology in terms of a 'theology of the cross' (*theologia crucis*), that is, God's salvific presence is hidden 'under the opposite' (*sub contrario*), in the godlessness of the cross (Flogaus 1997: 292–294). For Luther, God can only be known in the crucified Christ, while Palamas views the transfiguration as the culmination of divine self-disclosure.

Moreover, Luther infers the existence of a *Deus absconditus* from God's 'alien work' (*opus alienum*) and thus posits an unknown, dark, and terrifying God, God in 'his majesty and nature' (*maiestate et natura sua*). The German reformer emphatically points out that we are not supposed to explore this hidden will of God that incomprehensibly works everything in everyone. Even the occurrence of death and evil would not be possible without God's omnipotence (see 1 Sam 2:6; Deut 32:39). We are not able to face this naked, absolute God, but must focus on the revealed God in Jesus Christ (Flogaus 1997: 285–300, 383–387).

7.2 Unity-in-different or difference-in-unity

A different approach is taken by a second group that interprets the relationship between the Latin West and the Greek East in terms of unity-in-difference or difference-in-unity (Lévy 2013; see also 2006; 2012). For the Catholic theologian Antoine Lévy OP, Palamism does not constitute a paradigm change in the Byzantine tradition. Furthermore, he is of the opinion that there is no fundamental divide between Aquinas and Palamas, even though these two thinkers lived in different cultural milieux and used a different conceptual apparatus to set out their approaches. Thus, Lévy needs to explain why the obvious differences between East and West, which he fully acknowledges, are not theologically divisive. He argues that the Greek East takes a cosmocentric approach to theology and locates relativity on the side of God. The divine energies, through which God providentially guides and deifies his creation, proceed from the immutable divine essence without being separated from it. From the perspective of creatures, the energies are an objective reality since they can be physically experienced and intellectually investigated. The Latin West, by contrast, takes an anthropocentric approach and relativity is located on the side of the creature. God's mysterious activity is beyond the intellectual grasp of the spatio-temporally limited created human mind. God's essence and operations are viewed as identical (Lévy 2013).

The Anglican theologian Anna Williams comes to similar conclusions and points out that the 'ground that Aquinas and Palamas share is vast compared to the points at which they diverge, and considered in context, even their divergences do not reveal diametrical opposition' (Williams 1999: 175). Regarding the essence-energy distinction, she sees continuity and discontinuity between the patristic understanding of this doctrine and its later Byzantine reinterpretation in the work of Palamas. But even in the work of Palamas this distinction should be taken as a nominal, rather than a real, ontological distinction. She considers the connection between the divine energies and deification as something novel in the fourteenth century. Williams finds in Aquinas a similar theological strategy. Thomas, too, uses patristic conceptualities and ideas and tries to deepen them without introducing a paradigm change. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that there are significant differences between Palamas and Aquinas. In Aquinas' work we find the notion of 'created grace', and

his *Summa Theologiae* appears to have a less explicitly mystical-experiential character than Palamas' reflections on hesychasm. Yet, on Williams' view, it would amount to a crude oversimplification to ascribe to the East a proclivity for irrationalism and to accuse Aquinas of rationalism.

7.3 Palamism as a problematic paradigm change

Some non-Orthodox commentators see Palamas as an innovator, who brought about a problematic paradigm change, or at least reinforced theologically problematic tendencies in the Byzantine tradition. In 1932, the Catholic scholar Martin Jugie published two seminal articles in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (1932a; 1932b) in which he analysed the theology of Gregory Palamas in great detail. For the first time Palamas' teaching was considered as 'Palamism', a system of theological propositions that could be compared to (Neo-)Thomism. Jugie's assessment was predominantly negative. He detected anthropomorphic tendencies in Palamas' thought and viewed this as a theologically questionable innovation in the Byzantine tradition (Jugie 1932a: 1758). He took issue with the real distinction between the divine essence and energy and compared it to heresies condemned in the Latin West, such as the case of Gilbert de la Porrée or Joachim of Fiore. Accordingly, he repudiated the Orthodox view that the Eastern Church, unlike Roman Catholicism, had preserved the authentic character of the early church. Jugie's articles on Palamas and the Palamite controversy, written almost one hundred years ago, were of high academic quality and constituted the starting point of the ecumenical debate about the essence-energy distinction in the twentieth century. Sébastien Guichardan, another Catholic theologian writing at the same time as Jugie, came to similar conclusions and saw the essence-energy distinction as irreconcilable with the doctrine of divine simplicity. Palamas' God is one, he argued, but he is not simple (Guichardan 1933: 113).

Jugie and Guichardan largely continued and elaborated on earlier Catholic critiques of Palamas. Already Denis Pétau/Dionysios Petavius (Petavius 1857) and Leon Allatzes/Leo Allatius (Allatius 1645) took a very critical stance on Palamas' work (Pino 2022: 11–13). Pétau interpreted the essence-energy distinction in terms of a real distinction (*distinctio realis*) and saw the divine energy as a problematic 'third' ontological reality (*tertium quid*) that liesbetween God and the world. He even went so far as to accuse Palamas, following the Byzantine anti-Palamites, of polytheism.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in an early essay published in 1977 that Palamism 'is a novel metaphysical experiment in Byzantine theology' and that Palamas, under the influence of Neoplatonism, 'hardened a somewhat *ad hoc* epistemological point into an ontological differentiation really present in God' (Williams 1977: 44, original emphasis). For Williams, the Palamite essence-energy

distinction threatens the divine simplicity. He finds in Palamas a tendency to regard the divine essence as transcendent to both the hypostases and the *energeiai*. While his predecessors regarded essence and *energeia* as inseparable, in Palamas the divine energies seem to constitute an intermediate sphere of divine powers that are not included in the divine simplicity. The differentiation between the mutable *energeiai* and the immutable essence not only affirms the existence of two completely distinct ontological spheres in God, but also problematically allows for the idea of unrealized potencies in the divine being.

John Milbank to some degree follows Williams and identifies in Palamas a theologically problematic notion of participation (Milbank 2013). While he acknowledges that the essence-energy distinction is part of Greek patristic thought, it is Palamas' reinterpretation of this doctrine Milbank takes issue with. Milbank distinguishes between two different models of participation. The first approach suggests that there is a non-participable part in God, a delineated ontological realm that remains completely inaccessible to created beings, and another aspect of God that is participable. In this model of participation, the absolute is conceived of in impersonal terms, for there is no unreserved self-giving. According to Milbank, Plotinian Neoplatonism follows this paradigm of participation. The second model, favoured by Milbank, emphasizes at once God's simplicity and his kenotic self-differentiation with respect to creation. The absolute gives itself without reserve, but precisely because of its unreserved self-giving it cannot be equated with any of its donations, which remain less than the giver. This second understanding of participation Milbank finds in theurgic Neoplatonism (Proclus, Iamblichus), and in a more Christian form in Latin and Greek Church Fathers such as Augustine, the Cappadocians, John of Damascus, and Maximus the Confessor. However, in his view, the Palamite essence-energy distinction belongs rather to the first type of participation and thus deviates from the theologically most convincing thinkers in the Latin West and Greek East.

Milbank sees parallels between the decline of the patristic and early medieval paradigm of theology in the West, which originally followed the second model of participation, and the transition from the Greek patristic period to Palamism in the East. He states that, at around 1300, fundamental paradigm changes occurred in both East and West – though the Greek East was less affected by this problematic development (Milbank 2013: 205). Milbank sees a certain similarity between the Palamite essence-energy distinction and the 'formal distinction' in the late medieval thinker Duns Scotus in the West: 'Not only does Palamas introduce a kind of formal distinction between the energies and the essence, he also introduces the same between the energies, or the divine attributes themselves' (Milbank 2013: 203, see also 167–169).

8 Conclusions

For most contemporary Eastern Orthodox scholars, the essence-energy distinction belongs to the very core of Orthodox theology and spirituality. It is intimately connected with other typically Eastern Orthodox concepts such as apophaticism and deification. Furthermore, many Orthodox theologians regard this doctrine as uniquely Orthodox in the sense that it has no direct equivalent in the Catholic or Protestant traditions. The idea of *energeia* has biblical as well as pre-Christian roots (Aristotle, Plato, Neoplatonism) and assumed a wide range of different but interconnected meanings throughout the patristic and Byzantine eras. The main theological function of the differentiation between God's essence and energy is to conceive of God's real presence in creation while preserving his transcendence. Although Orthodox authors continued to write about the doctrine of the divine energies after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, it lost its central place in Orthodox theology. It was only in the twentieth century that its theological significance for the Eastern tradition was fully rediscovered. This rediscovery coincided with a more general and wider renewal of Orthodox theology and spirituality in the second half of the twentieth century.

From an ecumenical perspective, the essence-energy distinction raises several interrelated questions, which need to be further investigated: what is the precise nature of this distinction, and how can it be reconciled with God's simplicity? This question is particularly relevant for the dialogue with Catholic theology, for, according to Thomas Aquinas, God's perfections and operations are identical to his essence. For the dialogue with Protestant theology, it is important to elucidate further how the Byzantine notion of God's hiddenness (essence) can be reconciled with trinitarian theology and God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ as love. Some Protestant critics have argued that the essence-energy distinction and the idea of the hiddenness and inaccessibility of the divine essence are the result of an incomplete Christian transformation of Neoplatonic thought. Various attempts have been made to build a bridge between the Eastern and Western positions. Nevertheless, more research needs to be done to distinguish between culturally and contextually conditioned differences and substantial theological disagreements.

Some scholars have established a dialogue between the essence-energy distinction and contemporary philosophy. In the wake of the 'Name-Glorifier' controversy, Russian thinkers developed an Orthodox philosophy of language that relied on the doctrine of the divine energies. The essence-energy distinction was used to set out a realist epistemology that conceives of cognition as a synergistic event between the subject and the object of knowledge. The Greek thinker Christos Yannaras draws on the doctrine of the divine energies to set out an Orthodox personalism that builds upon Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics. Finally, an attempt has been made to establish a dialogue between theology and (quantum) physics that draws parallels between the apophatic dimension of scientific and theological language. In this comparative approach, the essence-energy distinction plays a crucial role.

Attributions

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