

Saint Gregory Palamas and the Heritage of the Cappadocian Fathers

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Abstract:

The relation between the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas and his antecedent patristic tradition was an essential theological issue raised among scholars during the twentieth century. Even though numerous studies have undertaken to situate the Father of Hesychasm vis-a-vis the preceding patristic heritage, the task of analyzing the patristic components of his teaching remains a delicate and open issue. This paper explores the major guidelines in the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas borrowed from the Cappadocian Fathers. It depicts the dynamics of his reception of their theological tradition and the extent to which they inspired him: whether he imitated and quoted them passively, or whether he was creative and renovative in rearticulating their theology ten centuries later.

Keywords: *Hesychasm, Apophatism, Energy, Pneumatology, Deification*

Introduction

In the fourteenth century, one hundred years before the great captivity of Constantinople, a new luminary shone in the firmament of the Church, and renewed the patristic tradition in Eastern Christianity. His name was Gregory Palamas, a monk of the Holy Mountain, Athos. Originally from Asia Minor, he became, later on, the Archbishop of Thessalonica and a Saint of the Orthodox Church. This Church Father is well known as the theologian of the uncreated light and the defender of Hesychasm: the practice of the Jesus prayer in stillness leading to union with God and illumination by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The time in which he lived and wrote was a critical moment in the history of Eastern Christianity, a phase of political, cultural and even theological turmoil and travail but also of renaissance (For the historical and intellectual framework of the Hesychastic controversy see: Lemerle

1951: 55-64; Papadakis 1969: 333-342; Clucas 1975; Τσάμη 1985: 51-69; Χριστοφορίδη 1993; Tsirpanlis 1993: 13-23; Κουτσούρη 1996; Μαντζαρίδης 2000). In such a vibrant setting, Palamas found himself in the position of defending Orthodox Dogma, theological method and monastic spirituality, confronting the intellectual elite of the Byzantine Church and society (Concerning the intellectual identity of the opponents of Palamas, see the interesting debate between Fathers John Meyendorff and John Romanides: Meyendorff 1959; Romanides 1960-1961: 186-205; 1963-1964: 225-270). Being a distinguished theological writer of his era, he remains, until our present time, one of the most prominent porte-paroles of the Orthodox Theology and spirituality [Κουτρομπή 1960: 122-127, 161-167 (Republished in Κουτρομπή 1995: 173-85); Κουτρομπή 1995: 157-169; Georgi 2010).

Contemporary interest in the study of Saint Gregory Palamas arose in the 1930's, with the efforts of theologians like father Dumitru Staniloae (Staniloae 1938; Toma 2007), as well as notable scholars of the Russian Diaspora and their contemporaries in Western Europe (Krivocheine 1938: 26-33, 71-84, 138-156, 193-215; Salaville 1945: 215-244; Kern 1947: 6-33, 164-193; Meyendorff 1959). Their writings led to a real affluence in the Palamitic studies, in the second half of the 20th century, and contributed in analyses of various dimensions of the thought of Saint Gregory and his school (Χρήστου 1960; Σταμούλη 2004: 121-161). Opinions in contemporary studies about Palamas remain divergent and controversial expressing the multiplicity of the backgrounds of the researchers dealing with this author (Behr 1960: 118-125; Stiernon 1972: 231-341; Ware 1977: 45-63; Synkevitch 2002: 131-188).

Among the essential theological issues raised among scholars was the relation between the teaching of the Father of Hesychasm and his antecedent patristic tradition. In the secondary literature, one can find, indeed, some initiatives undertaken by contemporary scholars to situate Saint Gregory vis-a-vis the preceding Patristic heritage (It is appropriate, in this framework, to mention the efforts of Florovsky 1972: 105-120; Habra 1957-1958: 244-252, 294-303, 338-347; Grondijs 1962: 323-328; Krivocheine 1963: 205-210 and 1986: 69-72; Nadal 1974: 297-328; Madzarides 1977: 1-18; Halleux 1975: 479-495; Patacsi 1975: 125-136; Sopko 1979: 139-147; Μπακάρου 1981: 64-68; Rossum 1985; Garrigues

1975: 315-320; Alfeyev 1995: 229-331; Larchet 2010). Even though numerous studies have tackled this theme, the task of analyzing the patristic components of the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas remains a delicate and open issue.

This paper intends to explore the major guidelines in the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas borrowed from the Cappadocian Fathers. It analyzes his reception of their tradition, and the extent to which they inspired him: whether he imitated and quoted them passively, or whether he was creative and renovative in rearticulating their theology in the 14th century.

1. The Simplicity of God

The first component in the teaching of Palamas that deserves to be observed is what is usually referred to, by researchers, as “the problem of the Simplicity of God”. Saint Gregory builds his theological system on a basic distinction he borrows from the Cappadocian theology: the distinction between divine essence and divine energies (For a different perspective see Houdret 1974: 260-271; Torrance 2009: 47-70).

A first necessary methodological remark to be made would be that Saint Gregory relies fully on the Cappadocian method according to which, unlike the Eunomian teaching, where any distinction (διάκρισις) on the ontological level of existence, entails necessarily a separation (διαίρεσις), the Cappadocian Fathers assert the non-confusion of the two concepts. Thus “διάκρισις” is clarified to designate “distinction” that is “non-confusion in unity”, while “διαίρεσις” becomes the technical term for “separation” or “a lack and even a complete absence of unity” (Lossky 1962: 65-66). This technical terminology became so crucial in Saint’s Gregory Palamas’ articulation of the concept of God, hidden and unknowable in His essence but manifested through His Light, Glory and uncreated energies.

One of the major theological premises, inherited by Palamas from the Cappadocians, mainly from Saint Basil’s letter to Amphilochios (Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 32, 869) and his book *Against Eunomios* (Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 29, 521-524; *PG* 29, 577-580; *PG* 29, 648), is the distinction between Θεολογία and Οἰκονομία, that is the names, the terminology, or the theological language we attribute to the internal relationships of the

three hypostases of the Holy Trinity, on the one hand (like nature, person, hypostatical characteristics...), and the names or language regarding divine manifestation in creation, on the other hand (That is the act of creation, providence, revelation, salvation and sanctification. See Pelikan 1993: 57-73, 107-119, 200-214).

In this way, the distinction between the inaccessible essence of God and His manifested energies (or operations), as expressed in Saint Basil's writings and by several texts of Saint Gregory of Nyssa (Μαρτζέλου 1982; Krivocheine 1975: 133-158), acquires a central importance in the shaping of the teaching of Palamas. It becomes his most essential tool for clarifying the dilemma of the simplicity of God and His unity, being able in the same time to interpret the paradox of God's transcendence and unknownability, and his manifestation and union with man (Ρωμανίδη 1984: 35-194).

2. Empirical Pneumatology: The Grace of the Holy Spirit a Gift of Life

As a result of his reliance on the Cappadocian distinction between essence and energy in God, Saint Gregory Palamas elaborates the Patristic concept of "ὄντος ζωή" (Gregory Palamas vol. 3: 170-171; Gregory of Nazianzus *PG* 36, 132B; Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 31, 345A). He explains that the gift of "true life" is the communion of man with God and his participation in the eternal divine life through the grace of the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian divine life was granted to human nature by the incarnation and redemptive act of the Logos of God, and man is called to acquire it, to be receptive of the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit which enriches and transfigures his existence and actualizes in his being the gift of divine adoption. He is called to become a son or daughter of the heavenly Father, a partaker of the glory and the beauty of the Triune God (Georgi 2010: 55-143).

In a remarkable text, Palamas says:

For the Holy Spirit possesses life in Himself, and those who participate in Him will live in a godlike manner, having attained a divine and heavenly form of life. For the Glory of the divine nature is above all divine life in the saints and their participation in every blessing (Gregory Palamas vol. 3: 98; Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 29, 772B).

Echoing the voice of Saint Basil in his Homily on God not being the Cause of Evil, and clarifying that “the further man withdraws from life, the nearer he approaches to death”, for “life is God Himself; and deprivation of God is death” (Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 31, 345A), Saint Gregory clearly states in his 150 Chapters that “the separation of man’s soul from the life-giving spirit of God entails its death, just as the body’s death is brought about when it is abandoned by the life-giving spirit of man’s soul” (Mantzaridis 1984: 22-24).

This insistence on the concept of “true life” not only revives the Cappadocian theology, rearticulating the sum of Patristic teaching on the fall of man, redemption and divine grace in the fourteenth century, but it can also be very functional in endowing the contemporary theological discourse on Pneumatology and the FILIOQUE with a dynamic character, touching the ethos of human existence (Georgi 2009: 74-85).

3. Anthropology: “In the Image and Likeness of God”

Saint Gregory Palamas adopts the manifold and dynamic conception of image from the Cappadocian tradition, where intellect, free will with “the host of corporeal and spiritual gifts which God has enriched mankind” compose the multiple dimensions of the divine image in man (Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 31, 344B; Gregory of Nyssa *PG* 46, 369C; Gregory of Nyssa *PG* 44, 137AB & 184B).

However, in his dynamic understanding of the image of God in Man, Palamas goes beyond his predecessors by applying the basic distinction of essence and energy on the realm of anthropology. Professor George Mantzaridis, in a statement very faithful to the texts of Saint Gregory, remarks that according to Palamas,

The energy of the intellect, realized as thought and intuition, cannot be identified with the intellectual nature from which it originates; yet neither can it be viewed as entirely different from it. And although the energy of the intellect is distinct from its nature, as consequence from cause, it is nevertheless related and united with the intellectual nature in being its intellectual expression (Gregory Palamas vol. 2: 378; Mantzaridis 1984: 15-17).

This is indeed a new dimension of Christian anthropology introduced by Saint Gregory Palamas enriching the notion of the image of God in Man.

Another important notion inspired by the Ethical Chapters of Saint Basil, is man's superiority over the angelic nature (Kern 1947: 6-33, 164-193. See also his elaborate study on the anthropology of Saint Gregory Palamas 1950). Palamas puts an emphasis on

a fundamental fact which renders the "image" in man more perfect than in angels. The angels, created like man, in the image of God, possess intellect, intelligence (logos), and spirit: but in their case the spirit does not possess creative power because it is not linked to a corporeal body, and in this regard it is inferior to the spirit of man (Gregory Palamas vol. 5: 56. See also Mandtzaridis 1984: 19; Papademetriou 1989: 23-31).

And here also, the critical attitude of the Cappadocian Fathers, expressed in their reservation towards the teaching of Origen, is obviously present in Palamas' understanding of the relation between the human soul and the human body, which he bases on the teaching of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. He characterizes the soul's connection to the body as "noetic eros", and explains that it does not wish to be separated from it nor does it abandon it voluntarily [(Gregory Palamas vol. 5: 56). Saint Gregory Palamas describes the relation between the psychosomatic unity as follows: «ὅτι νοερός ἐστὶν ἔρως τὸ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πνεῦμα, τὸ τοῦ σώματος ζωοποιόν, ὃπερ ἐκ τοῦ νοῦ ἐστὶ καὶ τοῦ λόγου ἐστὶ, καὶ ἐν τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τῷ νῷ ἐστὶ, καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἔχει τὸν τε λόγον καὶ τὸν νοῦν». (See Gregory of Nyssa VI, 173^ε)]. In such a Cappadocian, and also Maximian context, human body stops to be a prison of the soul but becomes, by means of asceticism and martyrdom in the case of some saints, a door to eternity. This understanding is obviously adopted in many passages of Saint Gregory Palamas, where he praises the sensory faculty in man, considering it a peculiar privilege granted to humanity being created in the triadic image of God. In the 150 Chapters he literally says:

Among many other things, one would say that the triadic nature of our knowledge shows that we are more in the image of God than are the angels. For not only is it triadic, but includes every type of knowledge. Among all created things only man possesses an intellectual, a rational, and a sensory faculty (Gregory Palamas vol. 5: 71-72; Mandtzaridis 1984: 19).

4. The Vision of the Eternal Light

In his defense of the nature of the Thaboric light, Saint Gregory Palamas asserts that “the light of the Transfiguration of Christ precedes the existence of the material light of the Genesis of the world and the darkness which interrupts that created light”. This eternal light “was, is, and shall be unto ages of ages” [«ἦν τε καὶ ἔστι καὶ ἔσται εἰς αἰῶνας»]. (Gregory Palamas vol. 4: 252). Basing his theology on the patristic tradition that antedated him, mainly the teaching of Saint Basil, he confirms that

all beings that existed before the foundation of the sensible and corruptible world, existed in the light, and that it was implausible for the angels to have been in the darkness, but rather, they had a majestic presence in the light and enjoyed the spiritual beatitude (Basil of Caesarea *PG* 29; Gregory the Theologian *PG* 36, 52B).

Saint Gregory Palamas goes beyond Saint Basil by accentuating the eschatological dimension of the spiritual experience. He characterizes this same light, revealed to the saints in prayer, as “the light of the future and perpetual age” and “our common hope” (Gregory Palamas vol. 2: 390; vol. 3: 277-278), clarifying that we should commune, from the present life, with the “heavenly light and the promise of the ultimate benedictions”, and that “while the condemned shall be sent to the outer darkness, the righteous shall find comfort in this light that transcends this world” (Gregory Palamas vol. 4: 249; Basil of Caesarea *PG* 40-41. See also: Gregory Palamas vol. 1: 651-652).

Palamas reproduces the teaching of Saint Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa concerning the unending progress in the contemplation of God. Describing the experience of the vision of the light, he indicates that the progress of the saints in the vision of God is infinite in the future age and similar to that of angels. He refers to “a desire and longing of those who attain this vision” which does not stop, because “the received grace drives them towards the greatest reception” and God “bestowing Himself is infinite and He grants generously and abundantly”. The sons of the age to come advance in the vision of God, receiving “grace upon grace” (John 1, 17) and they ascend “the indefatigable ascent” (Gregory Palamas vol 1: 517). The continuous and uninterrupted knowledge of God as experienced by the angels and as shall

be experienced by the saints in the age to come, is a continuous progress “in the most apparent vision in the unending age”. It can be tasted by man in the present life, not only in the form of a yearning and beseeching, but also like the ascent of Moses to the most shining vision. By this vision, the saints see, beyond the capacities of vision, the light and God who is revealed inside it (Gregory Palamas vol. 1: 590; Gregory of Nyssa *PG* 44, 376D-377 A).

But man never sees the entirety of divinity. His unending perception of it is partial and depends on the extent to which he made himself receptive of the grace of the Holy Spirit (Gregory Palamas vol. 1: 427; Gregory of Nyssa *PG* 44, 684).

Thus, in complete harmony with the teaching of Saint Basil the Great, Palamas reminds us that the pure-hearted perceive and taste eternal divine life even in this present age, assimilating through the vision of God, the uncreated deifying energy. “Because the saints do not only see, but they are also affected by the radiance of God”. Exactly as Saint Gregory the Theologian Explains, they are united to the divine energy, since “the energy of God and of the saints is one” (Gregory Palamas vol. 2: 344-345; Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 52, 826; Gregory Palamas vol. 2: 465; Gregory the Theologian *PG* 36, 29A). The saints, united to the will, the energy and the radiance of the Holy Trinity, taste eternal life in the present time, becoming sons and heirs of God.

5. Theologizing: The Methods of Expression of the Divine Truth

Like the Cappadocians, who rejected the Origenic tendency to adopt Platonic Patterns of mind in general as well as specific aspects of Aristotelian thought (Florovsky 1972: 71), Palamas promotes a method of theologizing where systematic theology, being an expression of spiritual experience, cannot be bound and limited by patterns of philosophical thought (Οἰκονόμου 2001: 313-344).

Father George Florovsky clarifies this principle by stating that the ultimate reference in the Patristic Tradition, is “...to the vision of faith, to spiritual knowledge and experience”, because “apart from life in Christ, theology carries no conviction and, if separated from the life of faith, Theology may degenerate into empty dialectics, a vain polylogia, without any spiritual consequence” (Florovsky 1972: 105-120).

Considering the spiritual life and experience as the major prerequisite for their science, the Cappadocian Fathers theologized, as Saint Gregory of Nazianzus puts it, “in the manner of the Apostles, not in that of Aristotle” (ἀλιευτικῶς, οὐκ ἀριστοτελικῶς) (Gregory of Nazianzus *PG* 36, 448C). Palamas in the fourteenth century returns to the same concept underlining that

our theosophy is a gift of God and not a natural one, which if granted to fishermen, renders them sons of thunder, in accordance with the Theologian Gregory, capable to teach by word the extremities of the ecumeni... (Gregory Palamas vol 1: 385-386).

The Archbishop of Thessalonica follows the line of the Cappadocian Fathers according to whom apophatism in theology is the attitude of the theologian facing God. In orienting his being towards the Holy Trinity, man does not speculate but he is transformed.

He affirms that in the illumination of the Holy Spirit, not only does man proceed to the knowledge of God, but God Himself, draws near man and reveals Himself to him. In a fashion that exceeds the power of the human being, the light allows him to see what transcends him. And just as the intellect, when it is united in an unutterable way with the senses, shows man, symbolically and sensibly, things that are perceivable, a similar thing happens when the senses and the intellect are united with the grace of the Holy Spirit, “they shall see the invisible light spiritually and are rendered similar to Him eternally” (Gregory Palamas vol. 1: 582-583).

Thus, inspired by the Life of Moses of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the Hesychast theologian explains that through the vision and experience of the union with the uncreated light, the apophatic way of theology is exceeded, because this knowledge of the divine light is the unique knowledge which examines the depth of God, and does not prohibit his cognition (Gregory of Nyssa *PG* 44, 376 D-377 A).

In such a context, Palamas quotes literally Saint Basil in passages like:

As the Sun when it falls on a pure eye, the Holy Spirit will show you in Himself the image of the Invisible One. And in the joyous contemplation of this image, you will see the ineffable beauty of the Archetype (Basil of Ceasarea *PG* 32, 109).

Another influence of the Cappadocian Fathers' method on Palamas is obvious in the way he conceives the relation between theological terminology and the truth of faith. Borrowing the pattern of the Cappadocians in their confrontation of Eunomios (Παπαδοπούλου 2002: 36-86), the Hesychast theologian distinguishes between the wording (ρήματα) in theology and the facts (πράγματα). He clarifies that "piety does not consist in words (ρήματα) but in facts (πράγματα)": «ὡς οὐκ ἐν ρήμασιν, ἀλλ' ἐν πράγμασιν ἢ εὐσέβεια» (Gregory Palamas vol. 2: 459-460) affirming that his theological quarrel is not about names «Οὐδὲ γὰρ περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων ζυγομαχοῦντες ἀσχημονήσομεν» (Gregory Palamas vol. 1: 54).

Following the Cappadocians, Palamas reminds us that the problem is not primarily in the use of a new theological terminology enriching the articulation of theological truths. He defines the parameters of the use of a new terminology, and the needed clarifications which should accompany it in order to avoid any confusion or divergence from the lived experience of the grace. It is legitimate for the Church to use a new terminology, whether in the sense of coining terms which did not exist in the previous tradition, or in re-using old terms with new connotations, while respecting and preserving older meanings (Σταμούλη 1999: 33-36).

The way the hesychast theologians conceive the relation between the wording of the theology and the truth expressed behind the terminology is not only useful for our actual condition, but it also protects the contemporary mind from fundamentalist adherence to literal wordings of Dogma (Ματσούκα 1986: 75-105).

Conclusion

The Cappadocian theology, undoubtedly, contributed in inspiring and orienting most of the themes of the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas, and influenced the inherent structure of his theological thinking. This is testified by the intensity and frequency of the passages that Saint Gregory quotes from their writings, appealing to their authority as a high criterion of Orthodoxy. One would dare to say that a major feature contributing to the greatness and ingenuity of St Gregory Palamas is his insight in reading the Church Fathers and renewing the genuine spirit of Cappadocian tradition in the 14th century.

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