

THE ESSENCE AND ENERGIES OF GOD

by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

To indicate the two “poles” of God’s relationship to us -unknown yet well known, hidden yet revealed -the Orthodox tradition draws a distinction between the essence, nature or inner being of God, on the one hand, and his energies, operations or acts of power, on the other.

“He is outside all things according to his essence,” writes St Athanasius, “but he is in all things through his acts of power.”¹ “We know the essence through the energy,” St Basil affirms. “No one has ever seen the essence of God, but we believe in the essence because we experience the energy.”² By the essence of God is meant his otherness, by the energies his nearness. Because God is a mystery beyond our understanding, we shall never know his essence or inner being, either in this life or in the Age to come. If we knew the divine essence, it would follow that we knew God in the same way as he knows himself; and this we cannot ever do, since he is Creator and we are created. But, while God's inner essence is for ever beyond our comprehension, his energies, grace, life and power fill the whole universe, and are directly accessible to us.

The essence, then, signifies the radical transcendence of God; the energies, his immanence and omnipresence. When Orthodox speak of the divine energies, they do not mean by this an emanation from God, an "intermediary" between God and man, or a "thing" or "gift" that God bestows. On the contrary, the energies are God himself in his activity and self-manifestation. When a man knows or participates in the divine energies, he truly knows or participates in God himself, so far as this is possible for a created being. But God is God, and we are human; and so, while he possesses us, we cannot in the same way possess him.

Just as it would be wrong to think of the energies as a "thing" bestowed on us by God, so it would be equally misleading to regard the energies as a "part" of God. The Godhead is simple and indivisible, and has no parts. The essence signifies the whole God as he is in himself; the energies signify the whole God as he is in action. God in his entirety is completely present in each of his divine energies. Thus the essence-energies distinction is a way of stating simultaneously that the *whole* God is inaccessible, and that the *whole* God in his outgoing love has rendered himself accessible to man.

By virtue of this distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies, we are able to affirm the possibility of a direct or mystical union between man and God-what the Greek Fathers term the *theosis* of man, his "deification"-but at the same time we exclude any pantheistic identification between the two: for man participates in the energies of God, not in the essence. There is union, but not fusion or confusion. Although "one" with the divine, man still remains man; he is not swallowed up or annihilated, but

¹ St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 17, tr. R.W. Thomson, Athanasius: *Contra Gentes* and *De Incarnatione* (Oxford Early Christian Texts: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971), p. 174.

² St Basil, in *Doctrina Patrum de Incarnatione Verbi*, ed. Franz Diekamp (2nd edn, Aschendorff, Munster, 1981), pp. 88-89.

between him and God there continues always to exist an "I - Thou" relationship of person to person.

Such, then, is our God: unknowable in his essence, yet known in his energies; beyond and above all that we can think or express, yet closer to us than our own heart. Through the apophatic way we smash in pieces all the idols or mental images that we form of him, for we know that all are unworthy of his surpassing greatness. Yet at the same time, through our prayer and through our active service in the world, we discover at every moment his divine energies, his immediate presence in each person and each thing. Daily, hourly we touch him. (The Orthodox Way, p. 21-23).

Essences and Energies by Vladimir Lossky

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The theology of the Eastern Church distinguishes in God the three hypostases, the nature or essence, and the energies. The Son and the Holy Spirit are, so to say, personal processions, the energies natural processions. The energies are inseparable from the nature, and the nature is inseparable from the three Persons. These distinctions are of great importance for the Eastern Church's conception of mystical life:

1. The doctrine of the energies, ineffably distinct from the essence, is the dogmatic basis of the real character of all mystical experience. God, who is inaccessible in His essence, is present in His energies 'as in a mirror,' remaining invisible in that which He is; 'in the same way we are able to see our faces, themselves invisible to us in a glass,' according to a saying of St. Gregory Palamas. (Sermon on the Presentation of the Holy Virgin in the Temple). Wholly unknowable in His essence, God wholly reveals Himself in His energies, which yet in no way divide His nature into two parts--knowable and unknowable--but signify two different modes of the divine existence, in the essence and outside of the essence.

2. This doctrine makes it possible to understand how the Trinity can remain incommunicable in essence and at the same time come and dwell within us, according to the promise of Christ (John xiv, 23). The presence is not a causal one, such as the divine omnipresence in creation; no more is it a presence according to the very essence--which is by definition incommunicable; it is a mode according to which the Trinity dwells in us by means of that in itself which is communicable--that is to say, by the energies which are common to the three hypostases, or, in other words, by grace--for it is by this name that we know the deifying energies which the Holy Spirit communicates to us. He who has the Spirit, who confers the gift, has at the same time the Son, through whom every gift is transmitted to us; he also has the Father, from whom comes every perfect gift. In receiving the gift--the deifying energies--one receives at the same time the indwelling of the Holy Trinity--inseparable from its natural energies and present in them in a different manner but none the less truly from that in which it is present in its nature.

3. The distinction between the essences and the energies, which is fundamental for the Orthodox doctrine of grace, makes it possible to preserve the real meaning of St. Peter's words 'partakers of the divine nature.' The union to which we are called is neither hypostatic--as in the case of the human nature of Christ--nor substantial, as in that of the three divine Persons: it is union with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence of God. In deification we are by grace (that is to say, in the divine energies) all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature . . . , according to the teaching of St. Maximus (De ambiguus). We remain creatures while becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by the Incarnation.

These distinctions in God which are made by the theology of the Eastern Church do not in any way contradict its apophatic attitude in regard to revealed truth. On the contrary, these antinomial distinctions are dictated by a concern for safeguarding the mystery, while yet expressing the data of revelation in dogma. Thus, as we have seen in the doctrine of the Trinity, the distinction between the persons and the nature revealed a tendency to represent God as a 'monad and triad in one', with the consequence that the domination of the unity of the nature over the trinity of the hypostases was avoided, as was the elimination or minimizing of the primordial mystery of the identity-diversity. In the

same way, the distinction between the essence and the energies is due to the antinomy between the unknowable and the knowable, the incommunicable and the communicable, with which both religious thought and the experience of divine things are ultimately faced. These real distinctions introduce no 'composition' into the divine being; they signify the mystery of God, who is absolutely one according to His nature, absolutely three according to His persons, sovereign and inaccessible Trinity, dwelling in the profusion of glory which is His uncreated light, His eternal Kingdom which all must enter who inherit the deified state of the age to come.