

Revd Dr Doru Costache

The Essence and Energy Distinction: A Short History

Guest lecture for TH104A Introduction to Orthodox Theology

St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

30 May 2013

Highlights

1. Addressing the cultural/philosophical roots of the distinction. Case in point, Aristotle's concepts of οὐσία (essence), δύναμις (power, potentiality) and ἐνέργεια (action, activity, actuality). What do these concepts mean when applied to things natural (=created) and in what way are they relevant to the uncreated?
2. The first successful patristic utilisation of the essence/energy distinction (fourth century). Case in point, St Basil the Great's opposition to Eunomius' arrogant claim to have been able to know God rationally as well as God knows himself. Human beings can only have knowledge of τὰ περὶ Θεοῦ (the things or qualities around God), i.e. the divine energies or manifestations; the divine essence of the inner life of God remains utterly transcendent.
3. The second successful patristic utilisation of the essence/energy distinction (seventh century). Case in point, St Maximus the Confessor's opposition to the imperially sponsored heresies of monoenergism and monotheletism (one divine energy and will in Christ). Given that the hypostatic union, i.e. the incarnation, has not altered the two natures and since therefore in Christ there are two natures, divine and human, which preserve their qualities intact, there are also two corresponding energies and wills.
4. The third successful patristic utilisation of the essence/energy distinction (fourteenth century). Case in point, St Gregory Palamas' opposition to Barlaam's intellectualist apophaticism, which together with denying the knowledge of divine essence rejected any possibility to experience God in the here and now. Whilst distinguishing between essence, hypostasis and energy in God, St Gregory advocated both the inaccessibility of the essence and the possibility of a real – yet mystical – participation in God through the uncreated energies or the divine manifestations of the Trinitarian persons. *Nota bene*, the distinction cannot be dissociated from Palamas' actual interests in articulating the uncreated/mystical experiences of the saints (=divine participation).

Recommended readings:

- Anastos, Thomas L. 'Gregory Palamas' Radicalization of the Essence, Energies, and Hypostasis Model of God' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 38:1-4 (1993): 335-49.
- Bradshaw, David. *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Chrysavgis, John. 'The Origins of the Essence-Energies Distinction' *Phronema* 5 (1990): 15-31.
- Costache, Doru. 'Experiencing the Divine Light: Levels of Participation in St Gregory Palamas' *On the Divine and Deifying Participation* *Phronema* 26:1 (2011): 9-25.
- Papanikolaou, Aristotle. 'Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God' *Modern Theology* 19:3 (2003): 357-85.