
THE THEOLOGY OF SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS INNOVATION OR TRADITIONS' CONTINUATION?

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Abstract

The article is devoted to questions of the relation of Saint Gregory Palamas to the issue of Theology. His doctrine is of considerable interest to Orthodox understanding of divinity, including the Orthodox ecclesiology. Besides, the questions important for philosophical, Church and historical science are revealed in the article as gives the chance to disclose the cultural and historical implication of theological concepts of the West and Byzantine East in the 14th century. This time is considered some kind of respite of East Empire and the period of its cultural blossoming after the Latin empire crash. It is created on the Rome empire fragments and before its disintegration in 1453 that gives the chance to pay attention to this historical period. On the basis of Saint Gregory Palamas's doctrines, together with other theologian's contemporaries, the authors of article solve the question of whether it is necessary to refer the divinity of Palamas as continuation of the Greek tradition, or it is an innovative discovery.

Keywords: divinity, theological doctrine, natural, mind, Christianity

1. Introduction

The divinity of Saint Gregory Palamas who became an archbishop Thessaloniki, causes a rough polemic in the West. Gregory Palamas doctrine is considered a mystical one for many western theologians. The originality of the archbishop's doctrine is that he paid a special attention to such doctrinal provisions, which are considered as rather courageous and exceed human understanding.

It is necessary to mark out the following authors: F. Dionisiatsky, A. Papadopoulos, A. Keselopulos and also the following modern writers: I. Meyendorf, V. Lossky, V. Krivoshein, etc. among the researchers of Saint Gregory Palamas's doctrine.

The important place is allocated for the questions of Theology's opportunities and its ways in Saint Gregory Palamas's works. At the same time the starting point of his doctrine consists in the statement of full incomprehensibility of God for mind and in the impossibility to express it in

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words. First of all such opinion of Palamas is connected with all his doctrine about the nature of the Deity. At the same time the author emphasized full inexpressibility of God in any name and its perfect uncertainty [1].

So Gregory Palamas comes to a conclusion that God becomes incomprehensible and inaccessible for the person because of His unrecognizability by mind. And the author bases a possibility of human communication on properties of its nature and its provisions in the Universe. The main idea of the author's doctrine is that God has created people on His similarity, having connected soul and body, material and non-material world in them. In other words, people represent the small world, the microcosm reflecting all Universe and unite it in a whole by Saint Gregory Palamas's understanding [2].

It is necessary to note that Palamas's education has considerably affected his views. He has been born at the end of the 13th century in Constantinople or in Asia Minor. A lot of time in his family has been devoted to deep studying of philosophy and divinity. Palamas had a vow of the monk on achievement of 20-year age and had become the archbishop Thessaloniki in 1347 [3].

It is also necessary to understand that Saint Gregory Palamas opposed opinion that body represents an evil beginning and is a sin source in the person. He considered such opinion some kind of slander on God who has created the body. He claimed that body together with soul is the God's creation, and the person is not only the soul, but the combination of soul and body.

Saint Gregory Palamas has been rather close connected with the spiritual environment of the Athos Mountain. And he put forward a question of the dogmatic plan on the Cathedral when he had been named in Constantinople in 1341 [4].

All this says that Saint Gregory Palamas's doctrine consists in fact of mystical experience which considers the possibility of divinity, studies the nature of this knowledge and also considers the nature of grace and its research perception. Besides he paid much attention to the participation of the complete person in Theology and person's unification with God. Such idea of the person who represents the complete essence is reflected in Palamas's doctrine about its reference to an image of God which is displayed in all his corporal and spiritual essence in comparison with angels.

So Palamas says that person's body takes part in spiritual life, opens an essence of his abilities to an enlightenment and connection with God in the uniform prayer which covers all person. From the point of view of gnoseology, Gregory Palamas's doctrine opposes the one-sided intellectual knowledge which can't know God, and also to the rational vision which is peculiar to the person. Accordingly, Palamas's doctrine has managed to be educated by all the being and for the purpose to reach unification with God. This thought of Theology's so complete character is the central line of Gregory Palamas's whole doctrine [5].

2. The beginning of the spiritual doctrine of Saint Gregory Palamas

Saint Gregory Palamas comes from an aristocratic family of Asia Minor which immigrated to Constantinople at the end of the 13th century. His father was a senator and was in the suite of Andronicus II the senior.

Having been born in 1296, Gregory was the firstborn in a big family. According to some data of biographers it is noted that his education proceeded in extreme piety which reigned in family. At the same time godliness was monastic and was concentrated on 'a clean prayer'. There is an opinion that Gregory's father often resorted to prayers at the Senate meetings [6].

After the early death of Gregory's father, he was under emperor's patronage. Therefore he was at the imperial court up to 20 years. His doctrine was rather successful as Gregory studied secular disciplines and Philosophy with one of the best teachers of that time - Feodor Metokhit, a theologian and philologist, rector of the university. Having become one of his best pupils, Gregory showed great interest to Aristotle's philosophy, and gave a lecture in the palace on Aristotle's syllogistic method for the notable persons of the emperor at the age of 17 years [3]. Despite it, Gregory always remained indifferent to policy and social life. Therefore he has left the palace at his twentieth anniversary, having left the philosophical occupations and has gone to the Sacred mountain, giving himself to the selfless way of life and occupations, being engaged in Theology.

It is necessary to notice that Saint Gregory was a scientist and the theologian; he was also a monk and a bishop. He understood the Philosophy very well, he didn't find time for the abstract philosophical problems, and he directed his attention to the questions of Christian life [7].

Speaking about Gregory Palamas as about the theologian, it is necessary to understand that he was an interpreter of spiritual Church experience, and practically all his works, except the sermons, are devoted to this topic. The theological doctrine of Saint Gregory Palamas describes the years of lonely reflections and contemplation. When the dispute on Divine Light begins, Gregory accepts the Orthodox party, having become its head [6, p. 97].

At first Saint Gregory's polemic with Varlaam was based on Palamas's denial of Varlaam's idea, which he stated concerning the Catholic doctrine about appearance of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. Varlaam said that God is incomprehensible by His essences. Therefore all judgments of Him can't be proved. In other words, he said that the relations between the Persons of the Holy Trinity can't be understood. Concerning Palamas's position, he showed rather critical relation to Varlaam's agnosticism. All this becomes the reason of disputes at which Varlaam, having learned about prayful practice of monks, noted them like Orthodox Christians, accusing them of heresy. Together with it he has expressed the critical relation concerning the way of a prayer and also about the doctrine and vision of God's world. Also Varlaam specified that thus no spiritual experience of Theology can be expressed, but it is rather a condition of self-deception [8].

As for Saint Gregory, he, being an Athos monk, has risen in defence of monastic prayful practice, showing his point of view about the divine energy doctrine. The fight was difficult, and has led to the fact that Gregory was transferred to exile, imprisonment and ban. And during the last years of life he has got to captivity. He has died in 1360. And he has been glorified and announced in the Community of Saints for the theological feats and wonderful creations in 1468 [5, p. 58].

It is necessary to tell that during lifetime of Saint Gregory Palamas ill-wishers suspected him of introduction of harmful innovations. At the same time such charge continues till present in the West.

It is necessary to notice that author's ideas have deep roots in tradition. A considerable part of his views and thoughts belong to one of the popular teachers of thought and piety in Byzantium - Father Maxim the Confessor. Together with it Saint Gregory's doctrine correspond to Pseudo-Dionysius writing [9]. Actually Palamas protected Christology at the level of belief. The vision of God is possible when divine energy is transferred to the person and is really acquired. The essence of the rescue consists in the given Palamas's doctrine when Christ saved and updated the person in the whole. Therefore the person in the whole with his soul and body gets the experience of knowledge of God and education by God's grace. The message of divine energy passes through the mystery of baptism; therefore palamism is impossible to be reproached in messialism [10]. It means that his doctrine can belong to traditional one. At the same time it isn't necessary to consider his divinity like the repetition of predecessors. In our opinion it represents the creative development of ancient traditions and begins with the life in Christ.

3. The essence of the doctrine of Saint Gregory Palamas

Gregory Palamas is one of the representatives of Orthodox divinity whose doctrine is rather innovative than traditional. All his doctrine is guided by two central statements. The first one consists in the creature character of the world which distinguishes it from God by creature that is expressed in the nature. At the same time Palamas claims that the nature isn't divine, however it shows the divine idea of the world and person by means of its 'creation'. The second statement consists in understanding that the nature shows itself in the perfective aspect only at communication with God. He explains perfection of the phenomenon of the Godman Christ with such statement [11].

The natural creature mind, even in its guilty look, has access to God by Gregory Palamas's doctrine. But at the same time it is necessary to understand that the exhaustive vision of God's essence by the creature mind remains inaccessible. So the person can know God only by analogy or by renunciation and rejection of everything that isn't Him [1, p. 241].

In this context Saint Gregory considers the value of Greek philosophy in a Christian thought in details. It should be noted that his general relation to the Greek philosophy is more spiteful, that is accurately looked through in his

polemic against Varlaam. Varlaam claimed along with Palamas that it is impossible to know God; however his arguments were constructed on the basis of Aristotle's logic. That is why they can't be applied to Theology as any Aristotle's knowledge relies on sensual experience [12]. Palamas also recognizes that God can't be known; however he says that it is not the result of sensual experience of the person, but is the result of person's own absolute transcendence. At the same time Palamas also speaks about a peculiar divine intuition thanks to the God's creation, through the world in which there are divine ideas, forces and energy.

According to Gregory Palamas's point of view, the Greek philosophers possessed all necessary possibilities for wisdom; however they couldn't use the knowledge. He considered that Christians need to handle the Greek philosophy as the druggist treats snakes. In other words, at first they need to be killed, later it is necessary to prepare and extend poison, and then the antidote can be prepared from it [8].

Such opinion of Palamas often meets negative attitude as it is possible to call his attitude to the Greek philosophy as not a spiritual one. However, from our point of view, there is no need to rank Saint Gregory Palamas as not spiritual person only because of his attitude to medicine. It is important to understand that his theology wasn't systematic as he wrote polemic works in the context of which exaggerations are possible.

The great value in the dispute between Palamas and Varlaam was played by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite writing which needs to be considered a classical example of compatibility of divinity and Greek philosophy, according to Varlaam. It is necessary to note that Gregory Palamas also refers to this writing, but in a more Christian option [13].

Gregory Palamas, explaining the vision of God, addressed to the experience of a constant prayer which leads monks to contemplation of divine light, experience of Church in Christ and in the spirit of Sacred which is inaccessible to natural guilty mind [11, p. 166]. And in Varlaam's understanding monks were ordinary ignoramuses who are making ridiculous contemplation, representing it like the experience of communication with God. In Palama's doctrine we see that he is on the side of the Athos monks, protecting thereby not only ways of a prayer, but also the whole outlook. For Saint Gregory protection of isikhasts became at the same time the statement of a possibility of Theology when it is possible to see the light of Transfiguration, not made by hand, in real life, about which the Saint Simeon New Theologian had told [8].

Such statement began on anthropology. So the person represents unity of soul, body and spirit for Saint Gregory Palamas. At the same time the spirit of the person is integral from God - from the Holy Spirit. In case when the person refuses such natural relationship with the Creator, thereby he/she dooms himself/herself to death and loses the humanity. In this sense the essence and maintenance of 'the image of God' in the person consists of relationship of the person and God by means of spirit. An important point according to Palamas is that the image of God doesn't come to an end only with spirit. In the doctrines

Palamas says that Christ has come to us in the flesh, having shown thereby the human body for the purpose to shame angels. The angels, according to the theologian, are only messengers whereas people are the crown and reigns of creation as all creation, including inner and material world that concentrates in them [10].

The human soul doesn't live in expectation of release from body's slavery of as soul loves body and is in continuous unification with it from the point of view of Plato's followers. At the same time only sin in human life is the negative moment. And even death became the blissful rest as has stopped being the awful and senseless end with Christ's arrival [14].

Such view of the person as a unit, according to Palamas, shows why, according to isikhasts, the soul can't pray by itself in the course of a prayer because of the union of soul and body. Palamas claimed in his writing that we also deal with matter and with our body in church. The person falls down, kneeling down, dawns on him a sign of the cross, kisses icons and honours relics of saints. Besides, we receive Christ's Body and Blood as food. Together with this connection of a prayer with breath is one of indicators of the general positive relation to a body. So, Palamas claims that the body needs to be suppressed and limited only when it appears before the spirit, seeking to gain independence from it [15].

Gregory Palamas's views cause some questions. Among these thoughts the ratio of his thoughts with Neo-Platonism are distinguished as neo-platonics also spoke about internal light. One more question is communication between monks-isikhasts and messaliansion which was considered as heresy and rejected all Church doctrine about the hierarchies and sacrament for personal mystical experience. Varlaam reproached isikhasts with this heresy. However in our opinion these reproaches have no confirmation as Saint Gregory points to a sacrament of the contemplate life basis. Palamas says that Christ's perception proceeds through baptism and the Eucharist which represents a sacrament and is a basis and the centre of all of Church life, without which the Church isn't Church [14].

The orientation of Gregory Palamas's anthropology and mysticism carries causes the special point of view, which absolutely differs from pagan Hellenism, including Neo-Platonism in which any movement or change of reality becomes the sign of falling, and beauty and good always remain motionless categories [9, p. 185]. The important points for Palamas are the movement and process as Christ has come to our world in time and has changed the relations of the person and God thanks to opening of the way of true communication of the person with God. Christ dressed in human nature, has shown to each person a possibility of unity with Himself by means of a sacrament. Gregory Palamas claimed that human life always addresses to the future in its movement and consists in achievement of all opportunities which are given us by God in Christ for the purpose of self-rescue of and rescue of all creation in the Second Coming [15, p. 64]. Imposing of mysticism is distinguished from many claims to Palamas from Varlaam. In other words this is the charismatic aspect which is inherent in the

doctrine of isikhasts. It is confirmed by the fact that East Christianity was always characterized by its peculiar personal measurement of spiritual experience. We can see in it that Christ has come to save each of us, but not to create the organization. But construction of Palamas's doctrine only to charismatic experience will be the distortion and impoverishment of his outlook [2]. We will notice that the Western thought, especially Thomism, specifies the objections against the concept of non-commodity grace. Our nature completely is natural, and all non-natural can't be defined by the person within Thomists' doctrines. So the person can't participate in divine life, and mystical experience has to remain inaccessible. Thomists claim that Christ has brought to our world only a remission of sins, some kind of amnesty whereas Saint Gregory says that Christ has given the chance to open understanding of divine life [16].

Some opponents of Palamas's doctrine can incorrectly attribute him a statement about existence of two deities, the highest and the lowest, recognizable and incognizable. But actually Saint Gregory said that communication with God is possible and therefore God is absolute above any communication [17].

Thus, we can tell that Gregory Palamas approves in his doctrine two logical incompatible truth: first of all God can't be known by His nature, and secondly, God's Revelation in Jesus Christ acts as a full Revelation which establishes a possibility of intimacy and unity between God and the person which is described by Saint Paul as an image of the Body which gives the chance to see God 'face to face' to the person.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of events which have been connected with Palamas's life and activity and also reading works of his contemporaries and assessment of the relation of officials of that time lead us to a conclusion that the most part of his contemporaries saw in Gregory Palamas not the innovator, but the representative of Orthodox conservatism.

The doctrine of Gregory Palamas in itself is development of the doctrine of the Greek philosophers. Quite often it was the subject of criticism from some Byzantine theologians who belonged to various movements. However his doctrine was formed gradually and mainly leaned on disputes which he conducted with the opponents. Such gradualness gives the chance to better understand ambiguous formulations which occur in his works.

In our opinion, the problems investigated by Gregory Palamas are characterized by important dogmatic value. Saint Gregory had spoken clearly enough about reality of mystical experience on the Cathedral which had been carried out in 1341 in Constantinople. He opened a possibility of knowledge of God, showed the nature of this knowledge and the nature of grace and also skilled its perceptions. The validity of his doctrine is fully natural as Palamas was not a religious philosopher, and was rather the theologian of traditional type. He comprehended the divinity not in a monastic environment, not by means of dialectics or scholasticism, and leaned on a liturgy, preferring philosophical

analysis over a prayer. The feature of his doctrine consists in his personal experience, relying on mystical experience in dogmatic questions, also as well as Orthodox Church which never carried out accurate differentiation between the field of divinity and mysticism.

So we can tell that Palamas's philosophy represents not only the movement of a theological thought but also represents the bright manifestation of mystical life of Church. Therefore we call Palamas rather a mystic, and his divinity has to be estimated on the mystical mood of his era. Substantially problems which arose in connection with such situation are the product of collision of divinity and mysticism.

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