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Biblical Theophanies and Hesychast Visions: A Theological Consistency on God's Presence in Creation

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Abstract

The study intends to emphasise a fundamental consistency between biblical theology, on the one hand, and Palamite or Hesychast theology, on the other, under two fundamental aspects: divine visions and God's action in creation. Thus, the early Jewish and Christian interpretations as well as Syrian and Byzantine commentaries preserved the biblical understanding of God's presence in creation and theophanies as perfect and genuine. Jewish Hellenistic authors, Philo in particular, translated this biblical theology of theophanies into a more philosophical expression of a *dual discourse* about God, which includes an unreachable dimension of the divine nature or essence and an accessible facet of God's powers, works, or actions manifested in creation. Most of the Christian authors of the Greek world took over this *dual discourse*—Justin, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Maximus, Ps-Dionysius, and Damascenus. Gregory Palamas is the last of these authors, and he articulated a *dual discourse* through his well-known distinction between essence and energy. He carried it on from Basil of Caesarea along with John of Damascus' adjustments. Thus, the Hesychast doctrine of uncreated energies is deeply consistent with the biblical theology about God's unmediated presence in creation.

Keywords

Theophany, Hesychasm, uncreated energies, deification, grace

The present study intends to highlight a fundamental coherence between biblical theology, on the one hand, and Palamite and Hesychast theology, on the other, under two central aspects: the nature of divine visions and the presence of God in creation. First, we will see that the Bible includes a particular theology that conceives the real—not symbolic, metaphorical, or mediated—presence and action of God in the world and in theophanies, from Moses' visions to the Tent of Meeting, to Solomon's Temple, to the prophetic revelations and those of the apostles. Modern biblical scholars tend to support this reading. Second, the early Jewish interpretations of Scripture and the early Christian, Syrian and Byzantine preserved this understanding and articulated theological views in line with the biblical theology of an unmediated presence of God in creation and in theophanies. Third, the Hellenistic school of Alexandria translated this biblical theology into a more philosophical language, a dual discourse about God, including an unapproachable aspect of divinity and one manifested in creation. Philo probably generated this twofold language, which the mainstream Christian theologians will later assume. My argument is that the Palamite or Hesychastic theology and its essence-energy distinction is part of this trend of a dual discourse about God incepted in ancient Alexandria. Therefore, it is coherent with biblical theology, despite being frequently and mistakenly criticised as innovation. Finally, we will find that this is not a marginal theological topic but has profound implications in the fundamental areas of liturgical theology, ethics, and spirituality.

I. The Theophanic Theology of the Bible

Theophany generally denotes God's manifestation or appearance in creation. It primarily refers to visual revelations involving divine light or the figure of God on the heavenly throne, as in Moses' visions or the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. More generally, however, the unmediated divine manifestations in creation can also be unseen, such as the presence of God's Name, YHWH, or the presence of divinity in the Body of Christ or the Holy Eucharist.

The concept of theophany involves two significant facets. The first concerns its place in the Holy Scripture. We will see that theophany is not a secondary but a fundamental idea of the Bible, biblical interpretation, and mystical traditions. The second facet regards its hermeneutics, the way we understand the nature of theophany: Is it the genuine manifestation of God in creation or just an illusion, a hologram that God produces for the eye of the visionary?

We must thus begin with the observation that theophany is present in the essential narrative articulations of the Bible. Following a theophany, Abraham leaves the land of his fathers for the Promised Land; following a theophany, Moses liberates the Jewish people from Egypt and receives the Law, the commandments, and the instructions regarding the Temple and its liturgies. Theophanies are defining moments in the lives of patriarchs and prophets who begin their missionary exertions following personal encounters with God.

Likewise, the defining moments of the New Testament are also theophanies, from Christ's nativity to his baptism, transfiguration, resurrection, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost. Theophanies, therefore, punctuate the crucial moments of the history of salvation. They are the milestones of the divine economy. I would call biblical theophanies "fundamental theophanies" due to their central place and function in the history of salvation and the divine economy to distinguish them from the theophanies of the saints. However, they are not distinct in nature. Theophany then played a vital role in Jewish mysticism, centred on the throne of God in Ezekiel's vision, as well as in Christian mysticism from Paul to the Desert Fathers, to the Neptic Fathers, to the Hesychasts, and to many contemporary Fathers.

To pinpoint a classic example, the character Moses contemplates in the burning bush unveils his identity and describes himself as God descended on the top of Mount Horeb: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". (Ex 3, 6, NRSV) In one of the most evident fragments, Exodus 17, 6, YHWH tells Moses: "I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb". Likewise, on Sinai, the text narrates in very realistic terms how "Moses went up

to God” and “the Lord called to him from the mountain” (Ex 19, 3). YHWH also explains his descent on Mount Sinai: “Then the Lord said to Moses, «I am going to come to you in a dense cloud»”. (Ex 19, 9) Then YHWH prepares the consecration of the people for the meeting with Him when He will descend on Mount Sinai: “Lord said to Moses, «Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people»”. (19, 10-11) Finally, the text describes in very realistic terms YHWH’s descent on Mount Sinai, the paradigmatic encounter between Moses and God, and the giving of the Law: “Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up”. (Ex 19, 18-20)

Another paradigmatic theophany is Isaiah’s vision of the Lord of Hosts, which depicts YHWH’s descent into the Temple without any rest: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said, «Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory». The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said, «Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!»”. (Is 6, 1-5)

These biblical passages and many others—the Psalms, Ezekiel, or Daniel, as well as the theophanies of the New Testament (e.g., Christ’s transfiguration or the descent of the Holy Spirit)—incorporated the theology of an instantiated presence of God in creation, without rest. That means that nothing in the texts indicates that these manifestations of God lack something of his genuine divinity, but they own all the distinctive

features of a complete divine presence. The Bible understands theophanies as God's factual descent in the creation and his theophanies as an actual divine presence. They were not a symbol or phantasm God generated for the visionary's eyes while He remained concealed in heaven in his true nature.

II. The Early Jewish Theological Vision on Theophanies

The second fundamental aspect of theophanies is interpretation, how readers understand biblical theophanic reports, what they think about God's presence in the world, and his theophanic manifestations. One may encounter two distinct approaches regarding the Jewish reception of the Bible. The first is more traditional and continues the literal reading of the Bible. Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, it took the lead for many centuries, being carried on by the rabbinic movement¹. *Targum Neofiti 1*, for instance, one of the primary rabbinic documents, remains very close to the old text of Exodus 3, 4-6:

“*The Memra of the Lord* called to him from the midst of the thorn bush and said to him: «Moses, Moses!» And he [i.e., God] said: «I *am* the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob». And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look on *the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord*².

¹ For rabbinic anthropomorphism, one may consult Arthur MARMORSTEIN, *Essays in Anthropomorphism*, vol. 2 of *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, Oxford University Press, London, 1937; Gershom SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, ed. Jonathan Chipman, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, Schocken Books, New York, 1991, pp. 251–273; David STERN, “*Imitatio Hominis: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature*”, in: *Proof 12* (1992), pp. 151–174; Alon G. GOTTSTEIN, “The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature”, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), pp. 171–196; Michael FISHBANE, “The ‘Measures’ of God’s Glory in the Ancient Midrash”, in: Ithamar GRUENWALD, Shaul SHAKED and Gedaliahu G. STROUMSA (eds.), *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity Presented to David Flusser on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, TSAJ 32, Mohr, Tübingen, 1992, pp. 53–74.

² See *Targum Neofiti 1, Exodus, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Exodus*, trans. Martin McNamara and Michael Maher, *The Aramaic Bible 2*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1994, p. 18.

The text also describes God's descent on Sinai in very realistic terms:

“And on the third day, *at the morning time*, there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the trumpet, which was very strong, and all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses led out the people from the camp to meet *the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord*, and they stood in readiness *at the foot* of the mountain. And Mount Sinai, all of it, smoked, because *the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord was revealed* upon it in fire; and the smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace, and all the mountain trembled greatly. And the voice of the trumpet went on growing very strong; Moses spoke *in a pleasant voice, and from before the Lord* answer was made to him in thunder. And *the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord was revealed* upon Mount Sinai, upon the top of the mountain; and *the Memra of the Lord* called to Moses *from the mountain*, and Moses went up”³.

III. The Hellenistic Interpretation of Theophanies through a Dual Discourse about God

The second Jewish trend belongs to some authors educated in Greek culture. On the one hand, they dismissed literal interpretations of theophanies for their anthropomorphic descriptions of God. As I argued in a previous study, such Jewish Hellenistic authors as Aristobulus, Philo, and Josephus programmatically refuted biblical anthropomorphisms in the spirit of ancient

³ *Targum Neofiti 1, Exodus, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Exodus*, on Ex 19, 16-20, p. 82. See also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* 19, p. 216: “Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord *had inclined the heavens to it and revealed himself* upon it in *glowing* fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The sound of the horn grew louder and louder. Moses spoke, and he received an answer *from before the Lord* in a *sweet and majestic* voice, and *sweet (was) the tone*. The Lord *was revealed* on Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up”.

Greek philosophers who initiated an anti-anthropomorphic campaign⁴. From Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570–480 BC) to Apuleius, Celsus, and Numenius, in the second century AD, anthropomorphism was a central topic of discussion among Greek philosophers⁵. This anti-anthropomorphist stance gradually led philosophers to an apophatic discourse about the first principle and God⁶. In this intellectual context, we find Aristobulus, Philo, and Josephus expounding their anti-anthropomorphic views.

On the other hand, it is remarkable that these Jewish Hellenistic intellectuals assumed a model of divinity according to which God is manifest and active in creation to be coherent with the biblical view. They did not adopt an Aristotelian model of divinity, of a God inactive in the world. We must remember that Aristotle conceived the first principle as a pure act, a perfect intellect (*nous*) that cannot contemplate sensible and temporary things but only its own perfection as thought thinking of itself (*noesis noeseos*). As an unmoved mover of the entire universe, it does not act within it but attracts everything to its perfection⁷. On the contrary, Plato and the Platonists proposed another fundamental model of the divine. According to them, the first principle is the Good in itself, and it acts with goodness in creation, therefore, has a constant activity within the sensible universe⁸.

⁴ See Dragoș Andrei GIULEA, “*Simpliciores, Eruditi, and the Noetic Form of God: Pre-Nicene Christology Revisited*”, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 108:2 (2015), pp. 263–288.

⁵ E.g., Harold W. ATTRIDGE, “The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire”, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II/16, pp. 45–78.

⁶ See, e.g., Gedaliahu STROUMSA, “The Incorporeality of God: Context and Implications of Origen’s Position”, in: *Religion* 13 (1983), p. 345, and Karen J. TORJESEN, “The Enscripturation of Philosophy: The Incorporeality of God in Origen’s Exegesis”, in: Christine HELMER and Taylor G. PETREY (eds.), *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality*, SBL Symposium Series, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2005, pp. 73–84.

⁷ See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* 1072 b and 1074b.

⁸ E.g., PLATO, *Timaeus* 20-40. For a more detailed discussion of the two models and their role in Christian theology, especially in Palamas and Hesychast theology, see Dragoș Andrei GIULEA, “Sfântul Grigore Palama, isihasmul și înscrierea în tradiție. Un model interpretativ dincolo de neo-palamism și originalitate”, in: Pr. Dragoș BAHIRM, Dragoș MĂRȘANU (eds.), *Despre isihasmul bizantin și alte studii patristice*, Doxologia, Iași, 2023, pp. 157–185.-

Remarkably, Hellenistic Jewish and Christian theologians embraced this latter model.

Aristobulus, for example, envisioned God as everywhere present in creation and his power manifested through all things (μόνος ὁ θεός ἐστι καὶ διὰ πάντων ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ φανερὰ γίνεται)⁹. Coherent with Jewish biblical understanding of theophanies, Aristobulus depicts the Sinai event as a divine descent (κατάβασις θεία) and a gigantic fiery appearance everywhere present (διὰ πάντων μεγαλειότητα), yet without combusting the burning bush, nor anything on earth¹⁰. There the people contemplated this work or activity of God (πάντες θεωρήσωσι τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ θεοῦ)¹¹.

A Jewish theologian and middle Platonist philosopher, Philo of Alexandria fashioned a dual discourse about God, in which one aspect is apophatic, hidden, and unmanifested, and one cataphatic, manifested, and active in creation. Philo is the first theologian to characterise the divine being, essence (οὐσία) or nature (φύσις) as unknowable and to distinguish it from the actions that God operates in the world, which he calls “powers” (δυνάμεις), “works” (ἔργα), or even ὑπαρξίς, the existence of God that his creatures may perceive¹².

On the one hand, Philo is the first to articulate an apophatic theology in its proper sense, as negative language describing God’s inaccessible dimension. The Alexandrian develops the apophatic discourse while interpreting biblical theophanies, in which he distinguishes God’s untouchable divine facet from his active presence in the world. Thus, Philo first urges his reader:

“Do not however suppose that the Existent (τὸ ὄν), which truly exists (ὃ ἐστι πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὄν) is apprehended (καταλαμβάνεσθαι) by any man; for we have in us no organ (ὄργανον) by which we can envisage it (ἐκεῖνο φαντασιωθῆναι),

⁹ Aristobulus, as preserved in EUSEBIUS, *Praep. ev.* 8.9.5 (GCS 43/1, 444).

¹⁰ *Praep. ev.* 8.10.17 (GCS 43/1, 453-454). This descent does not have a particular location because God is everywhere (ὥστε τὴν κατάβασιν μὴ τοπικὴν εἶναι, πάντῃ γὰρ ὁ θεός ἐστιν; *Praep. ev.* 8.10.12-14 [GCS 43/1, 453]).

¹¹ *Praep. ev.* 8.10.12 (GCS 43/1, 453).

¹² PHILO, *De posteritate Caini* 168–169, ed. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker; *LCL* 27, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1948, pp. 428–429.

neither in sense (οὐτ' αἴσθησιν), for it is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind (οὐτε νοῦν)¹³.

On the other hand, Philo mentions an accessible and knowable dimension of the divine. It is the manifested presence (ὑπαρξίς), which he also calls God's active power (δύναμις), glory, or rays. The following passage from *De posteritate Caini* is an appropriate illustration of this idea:

“But the Being that in reality is (τὸ δὲ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὄν) can be perceived and known (κατανοεῖσθαί τε καὶ γνωρίζεσθαι), not only through the ears, but with the eyes of the understanding (τοῖς διανοίας ὄμμασιν), from the powers that range the universe (ἐκ τῶν κατὰ τὸν κόσμον δυνάμεων), and from the constant and ceaseless motion of His ineffable works (τῶν ἀμυθῆτων ἔργων). Wherefore in the great Song there come these words as from the lips of God, «See, see that I AM» (Deut 32:39), showing that He that actually is (τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος) is apprehended by clear intuition (ἀντικαταλαμβανομένου) rather than demonstrated by arguments carried on in words. When we say that the Existent One (τὸ ὄν) is visible (ὄρατὸν), we are not using words in their literal sense, but it is an irregular use of the word by which it is referred to each one of His powers. In the passage just quoted

¹³ PHILO, *Mut.* 7 (LCL Philo 5, 144-146). Cf. PHILO, *Somn.* 1.230; *Post.* 18-19; *Mos.* 1.75. For development of apophatic theology and the dual theological discourse as a Jewish Hellenistic interpretation of biblical theophanic reports, see Dragoş A. GIULEA, “The Divine Essence, that Inaccessible *Kabod* Enthroned in Heaven: Nazianzen’s *Oratio* 28,3 and the Tradition of Apophatic Theology from Symbols to Philosophical Concepts”, in: *Numen* 57 (2010), pp. 1-29, esp. 14-15, and Dragoş A. GIULEA, “The Noetic Turn in Jewish Thought”, in: *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 42 (2011), pp. 23-57, esp. 40-42. See also Harry A. WOLFSON, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947, pp. 121-158; Jean DANIELOU, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique aux II^e et III^e siècles*, Desclée, Paris, 1961, pp. 298-327; Ekkehard MÜHLENBERG, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1966, pp. 58-64; Esther STAROBINSKI-SAFRAN, “Exode 3,14 dans l’oeuvre de Philon d’Alexandrie”, in: P. VIGNAUX (ed.), *Dieu et l’Être: Exégèses d’Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20,11-24*, Centre d’études des religions du livre, Études augustinienes, Paris, 1978, pp. 47-55, esp. 55.

He does not say «See Me», for it is impossible that the God who is should be perceived (κατανοηθῆναι) at all by created beings. What he says is «See that I AM», that is «Behold My subsistence (ὑπαρξιν)». For it is quite enough for a man's reasoning faculty to advance as far as to learn that the Cause of the Universe is and subsists (ἔστι τε καὶ ὑπάρχει). To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about essence or quality (οὐσίας ἢ ποιότητος) in God, is a folly fit for the world's childhood. Not even to Moses, the all-wise, did God accord this, albeit he had made countless requests, but a divine communication was issued to him, «Thou shalt behold that which is behind Me, but my Face thou shalt not see» (Ex 33, 23). This meant, that all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man's apprehension (καταληπτὰ), while He Himself alone is beyond it (αὐτὸς δὲ μόνος ἀκατάλεπτος), beyond, that is, in the line of straight and direct approach, a mode of approach by which (had it been possible) His quality would have been made known; but brought within ken by the powers that follow and attend Him (τῶν ἐπομένων καὶ ἀκολουθῶν δυνάμεων καταληπτός); for these make evident not His essence (οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν) but His subsistence (τὴν δ' ὑπαρξιν) from the things which He accomplishes (ἐκ τῶν ἀποτελουμένων)¹⁴.

Similarly, Flavius Josephus distinguishes between two dimensions of the divine: while divine form and magnitude are unreachable, the human mind can perceive God's works and acts of grace: "He is evident through his works (ἔργοις) and acts of grace (χάρισιν), and more apparent than anything else, but in form (μορφήν) and greatness (μέγεθος) beyond our description (ἀφανέστατος)."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Post.* 167-169. Compare with *Deus* 62; *Fug.* 165; *Spec.* 1.32-40; *Virt.* 215; *Mos.* 2.99-100.

¹⁵ JOSEPHUS, *C. Ap.* 2.190. For the Greek text, see FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Über die Ursprünglichkeit des Judentums (Contra Apionem)* Band 2, ed. Folker Siegert, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2008, p. 179. English text in *Against Apion*, vol. 10 of *Flavius Josephus*, trans. John M.G. Barclay, Brill, Leiden, 2007, p. 277.

We may conclude that this dual description of God represents a Jewish Hellenistic strategy designed to specify that God is simultaneously present in the world and utterly transcendent. It might be a response to Aristotelism and Stoicism since the Stoa conceived the first principle - the Logos or Pneuma - as part of the universe. Philo developed the dual discourse philosophically, which is more congruent with the Platonic model of the divine present and active in creation rather than the Aristotelian one. As an anonymous treatise from the early Christian centuries falsely attributed to Justin Martyr and Philosopher stated, "God is always, by his nature, volitional and active"¹⁶. Additionally, the Platonic model is consistent with the biblical theology of a God genuinely manifest in creation and theophanies.

The Christian authors will perceive very early the qualities of this Hellenistic philosophical strategy of a dual discourse about God. They will impropriate it, even employing sometimes other terminologies, from "works" and "powers" to "activities" and "energies". Additionally, it is now well-established among scholars that Palamas' cardinal theological distinction between the divine essence and energies actually belongs to Basil of Caesarea, the first to articulate it in these words¹⁷. I argue that this Basilian or Palamite difference between essence and energies represents the same Alexandrian strategy of a dual discourse about God. Consequently, the main question regarding Palamas' distinction - which is that it infringes divine simplicity - has to be addressed to all this chain of theologians, from Philo to all those who preceded Palamas: Clement, Origen, Basil, Pseudo-Dionysus, Maximus, and John of Damascus. None of them perceived that the dual discourse infringes divine simplicity because the distinction between essence and activities is not spatial, and there is no place where God resides in himself. For that reason, divine energies are not external to God. Consequently, none of the theologians belonging to this chain

¹⁶ PSEUDO-JUSTIN MARTYR, *Opuscula theologica et philosophica* 27, PG 91, 280C. Cf. M. RICHARD, "Un faux dithélite. Le traité de S. Irénée au diacre Démétrius", in: Peter WIRTH (ed.), *Polychronion. Festschrift F. Dölger*, C. Winter, Heidelberg, 1966, p. 439.

¹⁷ Vezi Alexis TORRANCE, "Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers", in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 63.1 (2009), pp. 47-70.

regarded the dual discourse as a violation of divine simplicity because God's inaccessible essence or substance is simple.

IV. The Dual Discourse about God in Patristic Theology

Christian theologians took over the Alexandrian dual discourse in the second century through Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Lyons. Justin agrees with Plato that God “cannot be seen by the same eyes as other living beings are. He is to be perceived by the mind alone”¹⁸. Therefore, “the Father of all has no given name, since he is unbegotten (ἀγεννήτωρ). ... But «father» and «god» and «creator» and «lord» are not names, but appellations derived from his beneficence (εὐποιῶν) and works (ἔργων)”¹⁹. This passage is relevant for disclosing another theological strategy associated with the dual discourse. It is a position regarding the divine names, which are not associated with God's concealed dimension, with what God is in himself, his essence, but with his manifested facet, his works, powers, or activities effected in creation.

In the same vein of thought and even similar terms, Theophilus of Antioch articulates in the following way his discourse regarding the two aspects of the divine: “Just as the soul in a man is not seen, since it is invisible to men, but is apprehended through the movement of the body, so it may be that God cannot be seen by human eyes but is seen and apprehended (βλέπται καὶ νοεῖται) through his providence (προνοίας) and his works (ἔργων)”²⁰.

¹⁸ JUSTIN, *Dial.* 1.3.7. Greek text from: *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. M. Marcovitch, PTS 47, De Gruyter, Berlin, 1997, p. 76. English translation from: ST. JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. T. B. Falls and T. P. Halton, CUA Press, Washington, DC, 2003, p. 9. See also Philippe BOBICHON (ed.), *Justin Martyr, Dialogue avec Tryphon. Édition critique, traduction et commentaire*, Paradosis 47, Éditions Saint-Paul, Fribourg, 2003.

¹⁹ JUSTIN, *2 Apol.* 6. *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis*, ed. M. Marcovitch; PTS 38, De Gruyter, Berlin, 1994, p. 145. English translation from: JUSTIN, PHILOSOPHER AND MARTYR, *Apologies*, ed. D. Minns and P. Parvis, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 285.

²⁰ THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH, *Ad Autolyicum* 1.5, ed. and trans. Robert M. Grant, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1970, pp. 6-7.

In his turn, Irenaeus of Lyons distinguishes between God's unknowable "greatness" or "magnitude" (*magnitudo*) and his "love" (*dilectio*) which humans may perceive:

"As regards His greatness (*magnitudinem*), therefore, it is not possible to know God (*cognoscere Deum*), for it is impossible that the Father can be measured (*mensurari Patrem*); but as regards His love (*dilectionem*) (for this it is which leads us to God by His Word), when we obey Him, we do always learn that there is so great a God, and that it is He who by Himself has established, and selected, and adorned, and contains all things"²¹.

The tradition continues in the third century, particularly in Alexandria, where Clement will take up Philonian terminology, admitting that God cannot be known in His being (οὐσία) but in His power (δύναμις) and works (ἔργα)²². His prominent successor, Origen, will develop a similar position. He argued that

"the works (*opera*) of divine providence and the art of this universe are as rays of the nature of God (*dei naturae*), in comparison with his own substance and being (*substantiae eius ac nature*). Therefore, because our intellect is not able to behold God as he is, it understands the Father of the universe from the beauty of his works (*operum*) and the comeliness of his creatures"²³.

²¹ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresies* 4.20.1, in: IRÉNÉE DE LYON, *Contre les hérésies*, livre IV; ed. Adelin Rousseau; coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 100, Cerf, Paris, 1965, p. 624; trans. ANF 1, p. 487.

²² CLEMENT, *Stromata* 6.18.166.1-2 (GCS 15, 517). See also *Strom.* 2.5.3-4 and 6.138.4. For the distinction between *ousia* and *dynamis* in Clement, see also Henny F. HÄGG, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginning of Christian Apophaticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 247-51. See pp. 154-179 for the evolution of apophaticism in Middle Platonism.

²³ ORIGEN, *Peri Archon* 1.1.6. For the critical edition and English translation, see ORIGEN, *On First Principles*, ed. and trans. John Behr, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, vol. 1, pp. 30-31.

Origen similarly agrees that “those who do not share His being (ουσίαν), nonetheless have a certain glory of God (δόξα τις θεοῦ) and His power (δύναμις αὐτοῦ) and, so to speak, an emanation of the Godhead (ἀπορροή τῆς θεότητος)”²⁴.

A similar distinction will later find its place in the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria, who claimed that God is incomprehensible in his nature. He is also good and loving humankind, and for that reason, making himself known to them through his works in creation:

“God, who is good (ἀγαθός) and loves men and who cares for the souls he has made, since he is by nature invisible and incomprehensible (ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατάληπτός ἐστι τὴν φύσιν), being above all created being (γεννητῆς οὐσίας), and therefore the human race would fail to attain knowledge of him in that they were made from nothing while he was uncreated - for this reason God so ordered creation through his Word that although he is invisible by nature, yet he might be known to men from his works (ἐκ τῶν ἔργων)²⁵.

Not long after that, Basil of Caesarea will express the distinction through some notions used in the discussions of his time, namely, οὐσία and ἐνέργεια, which are precisely the notions Gregory Palamas employed in his works²⁶. As with other Basilian doctrines, the distinction also appears

²⁴ ORIGEN, *On Prayer* 23.5, GCS 3,353. English text in ORIGEN, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan A. Greer, Paulist Press, New York, 1979, p. 128.

²⁵ ATHANASIUS, *Contra gentes* 35, in: ATHANASIUS, *Contra gentes and De Incarnatione*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Thomson, OECT, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, pp. 94-95. See also *Contra gentes* 2 (OECT, pp. 6-7): “God, the Creator of the universe and the king of all, who is beyond all being (ὑπερέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας) and human thought, since he is good (ἀγαθός) and bountiful, has made mankind in his own image through his own Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ”.

²⁶ See BASIL OF CAESAREA, *Ep.* 234. Expounding on the distinction between essence and energies, Palamas quotes precisely this Basilian letter, in: *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 111, coll. *The Philokalia*, ed. and trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, 4 vols., Faber and Faber, London, 1995, p. 397.

in Gregory the Theologian and especially in Gregory of Nyssa, who further developed and refined it philosophically and theologically. He recorded, indeed, that

“while it is true that the divine Nature (θεία φύσις) is glorified in itself alone and before the birth of conceptual thinkers, yet the human mind utters only as much as it is able to learn from the activities (ἐνεργειῶν). «From the greatness and beauty of created things, reasoning backwards», says Wisdom, «the generative Source of all things is perceived». We utter such titles for the divine Being (οὐσία) which transcends all thought (ὑπερεχούση πάντα νοῦν)”²⁷.

However, despite being used and classicised by the Cappadocian Fathers, the distinction between essence and energies was not a dogma at the time. So, an original theologian like Pseudo-Dionysius will articulate a similar dual discourse about God, yet through a different terminology. On the one hand, Pseudo-Dionysius is the champion of apophaticism, describing the concealed dimension of the divine as beyond knowledge, being, and any human language. On the other hand, he is not an agnostic but enunciates an aspect of divine manifestation, which he calls “processions”. The following passage demonstrates his awareness of the necessity of such a dual discourse:

“Many scripture writers will tell you that the divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also «unsearchable and inscrutable», since there is not a trace for anyone who would reach through into the hidden depths of this infinity. And yet, on

²⁷ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Against Eunomius* 2.154 (GNO 1, p. 270). English text in GREGORY OF NYSSA: *Contra Eunomium II: An English version with supporting studies: Proceedings of the 10th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Olomouc, September 15–18, 2004)*, ed. Lenka Karfíková et al., trans. Stuart George Hall, VCS 82, Brill, Leiden, 2007, vol. 2, p. 92. Another significant passage is *Eun.* 2.304 (GNO 1, p. 315; VCS 82, p. 127): “It is clear that the Divinity (τὸ θεῖον) is given names (ὀνοματοποιεῖσται) with various connotations in accordance with the variety of his activities (ἐνεργειῶν), named in such a way as we may understand”.

the other hand, the Good is not absolutely incommunicable to everything. By itself it generously reveals a firm, transcendent (ὑπερούσιον) beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it²⁸.

Another aspect of the reception of the Cappadocian and Palamite essence-energies distinction concerns its further development in Saint Maximus²⁹ and especially in the work of John Damascene, who added the term *hypostasis* to connote the agent who produces the action³⁰. Gregory Palamas' writings reflect this development, indicating his detailed knowledge of the Cappadocians and the Damascene³¹.

Lastly, we should mention Syriac literature because its biblical character preserved all the central theological patterns of the Bible, including the realistic view of God's genuine descent and presence in creation and theophanies. It conceives of a dialectic of what is hidden and revealed in God, although slightly distinct from the Alexandrian legacy. Ephrem the Syrian's theology, for instance, implies the subjectivity of the one who advances in discovering God's concealed dimension. However, the human being is not able to know God completely: "Who will not give thanks to the Hidden One, most hidden of all, who came to open revelation,

²⁸ *The Divine Names* 1.2, in: PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, Paulist Press, New York, 1987, p. 50. Critical edition in: PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *Corpus Dionysiacum* I. *De divinis nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla; PTS 33, de Gruyter, Berlin, 1990, p. 110.

²⁹ E.g., MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Chapters on Theology and the Economy* 1.2 and 2.1.

³⁰ JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 3.15, PG 94, 1048A. Gregory Palamas quotes this particular passage with the triple distinction in his *One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 129 (*Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 407).

³¹ Two remarkable monographs have investigated this distinction's reception history, and are worth mentioning here: David BRADSHAW, *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, and Jean-Claude LARCHET, *La théologie des énergies divines. Des origines à saint Jean Damascène*, Cerf, Paris, 2010. While agreeing with Larchet that the Fathers developed their theology of divine energies on a different ground than Philo's thought (p. 81) – in fact on a Christian Trinitarian vision of God – I would argue that the metaphysical logic of the dual discourse about God begins with Philo and the Jewish Hellenism.

most open of all, for He put on a body, and other bodies felt Him - though minds never grasped Him"³². Revelation and theophanies do not exhaust God's concealment and mystery, which is infinite, and remains "hidden in His revealing"³³.

For Ephrem, the heights of heaven are manifest on earth in different degrees of revelation. Thus, Christ is the "Lord of the Cherubim" whom Adam saw entering and dwelling in Paradise "near the boughs of the Tree of Life"³⁴, and Moses and Elijah contemplated, for a second time, on the Mount of Transfiguration together with apostles Peter, John, and James³⁵. Likewise, the Syrian shows that the divine glory was present with the crucified Christ, however not disclosed to the many: "the glory of the Anointed, the true Light, shone forth from Golgotha"³⁶. In personal theophanies, Christ remains again "hidden in His revealing," as Ephrem describes him mystically: "Your inquiry overtakes us and is unsearchable, Your Light fills us but is unable to be grasped"³⁷.

V. Modern Interpretations of Biblical Theophanies

Biblical scholars generally agree that the scriptural text affirms an action of God in the world. They disagree on other related topics, secondary to the present investigation, for example, whether it is appropriate to call Old Testament history or not since an atheist would call it mythology. Following the discussions between James Barr³⁸ and Gerhard von Rad on

³² EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Faith* 9:7, apud Sebastian BROCK, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Cistercians Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1992, p. 28.

³³ EPHREM THE SYRIAN, "Hymns of Nativity" 36:9, in: EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey, Paulist Press, New York, 1989, p. 423.

³⁴ EPHREM THE SYRIAN, "Hymns of Nativity" 1:41, p. 69.

³⁵ EPHREM THE SYRIAN, "Hymns of Nativity" 1:35, p. 68.

³⁶ EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymns on Virginit*y 5:1, in: EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymns*, p. 281.

³⁷ EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymns on Virginit*y 52:7, p. 467. *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 129, in: *Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 407.

³⁸ James BARR, "Revelation through History in the OT and in Modern Theology", in: *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 17 (1963), pp. 193-205.

this topic, Wolfhart Pannenberg summarised them and concluded in this way:

“Israel in OT days viewed history as divine action. It spoke of the «acts of God» or of the totality of these acts. The elders who were chosen in Josh 24, 31 were men who «had known all the work which the Lord [Yahweh] did for Israel», i.e., the whole history of the exodus, the making of the covenant, and the conquest (cf. also Judg 2, 7.10). The prophet Isaiah in 5, 12 complained that the people «do not regard the deeds [*ma'aseh*] of the Lord [Yahweh]». Ps. 33, 4 invites the people to praise God because «all his work is done in faithfulness» (*'emunah*). In these verses we have a total view of the acts of God. It is not an abstract view, but since there is a series or sequence, we can very well speak of the history of God's acts. This view of history is certainly not the same as the modern view which makes individuals, institutions, nations, or humanity as a whole the acting subject of history. For this reason Klaus Koch uses the term «metahistory» for the early understanding of history in Israel³⁹. From the modern, secular standpoint this term might well seem to be apt, yet it must not cause us to think that early Israel saw another history standing behind real history. For Israel the history of the acts of God was itself the real history that embraces all human action. This view of history does not rule out human action. It includes it, but not as that which unifies and gives coherence to occurrence”⁴⁰.

This fact, however, does not prevent Pannenberg from rejecting Gregory Palamas' theology along with many other Protestant or Catholic theologians. His main argument is the classic argument against Palamas' distinction: God's activities cannot be uncreated because that would

³⁹ Klaus KOCH, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 of *The Assyrian Period*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1982, p. 145. In “Geschichte II”, *TRE* 13 (1984), pp. 569-586, Koch also uses the notion of “suprahistory”.

⁴⁰ Wolfhart PANNENBERG, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, T&T Clark, London, 2004, vol. 1, pp. 230-231.

double the divinity and split the divine simplicity. The persistence of this argument unveils something deeper regarding the evolution of theology in the West. Western theologians are unfamiliar with the dual discourse about God and its long legacy. Additionally, I argue that it represents the Hellenistic philosophical translation of biblical theology about theophany.

Once again, from Philo to Clement, to Origen, to Athanasius, to Basil and the other Cappadocians, to Pseudo-Dionysius, to Maximus and John of Damascus, the dual discourse was a philosophical strategy to secure concomitantly divine transcendence and genuine presence in the universe. None of them perceived the strategy of the dual discourse as dividing God or splitting divine simplicity. In its essence, the question regarding the distinction between essence and energies must be addressed not only to Palamas but to this strategy and its metaphysical framework.

Western theologians have articulated, over time, two different perspectives from the Eastern one. First, starting with Augustine, they conceived theophanies as created images which God produced for the visionary's eye and mind⁴¹. Second, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas' programmatic assimilation of the Aristotelian philosophical language represents an extraordinary intellectual and theological endeavour. Nonetheless, compared to the Eastern theological tradition, the Aristotelian programme led to some divergent conclusions, particularly the Aristotelian idea that God is not directly active in creation. According to Thomas, God acts in the universe through mediation, through his secondary principles, also called *rationes seminales*⁴².

⁴¹ Bogdan B. BUCUR, "Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective", in: *St Vladimir Theological Quarterly*, 52 (2008), pp. 67-93. See also John MANOUSSAKIS, "Theophany and Indication: Reconciling Augustinian and Palamite Aesthetics," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 76-89.

⁴² (1) "God is said to have stopped creating new creatures on the seventh day because nothing was made afterwards that did not come first in some likeness according to genus or species, at least in a seminal principle . . . Therefore, I say that the future renewal of the world indeed came first in the works of the six days in a remote likeness" (*In IV sent.*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3); (2) "For we see that all things which, in the process of time, being created by the work of Divine Providence, were produced by the operation of God, were created in the first fashioning of things according to seed like forms [*seminales rationes*], as Augustine says [*De Gen. ad litt.* 7.3], such as trees, animals, and the rest" (*ST I*, q. 62, a. 3, corr.); (3) "In the first production of things

As is known since the beginning of the Palamite dispute, the Hesychasts faced the criticism that God could not be outside of Himself through activities or glory because divine simplicity would be split and even induce a second God. According to the Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysical framework, everything different from God, everything that exists in creation - hence, secondary causes (or seminal reasons), God's activities and grace - cannot be uncreated. All are creatures.

Unlike the classic Catholic interpretation, A. N. Williams argued - in a hermeneutical effort of manifest ecumenical notes, entitled *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* - that especially Thomas' mature work (*Summa theologiae*) supports a doctrine of uncreated grace, in line with Palamas and the Eastern theologians⁴³.

Later, Luke Davis Townsend continued Williams' research with the study "Deification in Aquinas: A Supplementum to The Ground of Union". The author argues that even though the thesis of created grace is predominant in the work of Thomas, the doctrine of deification is based on uncreated grace and God's unmediated presence with the believer⁴⁴.

Nevertheless, Richard Cross, a prominent Thomist, has responded to these studies by arguing that Thomas identifies deification with participation in the godhead. Yet, this participation is in the likeness that the grace fashions in the human being, and this grace is created⁴⁵. In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas affirms: "It is necessary that God alone deifies (*deificet*), by sharing a partaking (*consortium*) of the divine nature

matter existed under the substantial form of the elements... In the first instituting of the world animals and plants did not exist actually... On the day on which God created the heaven and the earth, He created also every plant of the field, not, indeed, actually, but 'before it sprung up in the earth,' that is, potentially [*potentialiter*]... God created all things together so far as regards their substance in some measure formless. But He did not create all things together, so far as regards that formation of things which lies in distinction and adornment" (*ST I*, q. 74, a. 2, corp. and ad 1-2).

⁴³ See A.N. WILLIAMNS, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1999, pp. 87-89.

⁴⁴ Luke Davis TOWNSEND, "Deification in Aquinas: A Supplementum to *The Ground of Union*", in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 66 (2015), pp. 204-234.

⁴⁵ Richard CROSS, "Deification in Aquinas: Created or Uncreated?", in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 69:1 (2018), pp. 107-132, esp. 127-128.

by a certain participation of likeness (*similitudinis participationem*)⁴⁶. Aquinas' commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius again identifies deification with participation in divinity by stating that: "he further shows the effect of divine power in those things that pertain to grace, saying that divine power gives that deification, that is, the participation of deity, which it is through grace"⁴⁷.

Finally, the discussion comes down to the concept of participation in God because even Orthodox theologians sometimes affirm that deification is participation in God. Therefore, the question arises as to whether the human being has real access to what is uncreated or remains within the domain of the created. Participation, however, is by grace; therefore, it depends on the nature and action of grace whether it can make a real connection with the uncreated divinity or represents only a symbolic one of likeness.

We can conclude that Aquinas' position remains the classically known Thomist view about grace as created and God as not participating directly or genuinely in creation. This position is imposed by the assumption of the Aristotelian metaphysical paradigm, which does not allow the first principle to act in creation because it would lose its perfection.

This metaphysical perspective is coherent with the Augustinian hermeneutics interpreting theophanies as phantasms or created images. Otherwise, God would be directly active in creation. Therefore, the Aristotelian metaphysics of the inactive first principle in the world is consistent with the hermeneutical position of understanding theophanies as creations for the visionary's eye. This last idea was already reproached to Palamas in his time⁴⁸.

Later, the Protestant world will conceive, through new metaphysical models, the same Western divide between a transcendent God and a

⁴⁶ AQUINAS, *ST I-II*, q. 112, a. 1 c., apud CROSS, "Deification...", p. 127.

⁴⁷ AQUINAS, *In Dionysii De divinis nominibus*, c. 8, l. 2, n. 760, ed. C. Pera, P. Caramello, and C. Mazzantini, Marietti, Turin and Rome, 1950.

⁴⁸ See GREGORY PALAMAS, *Triads* 2.3.20. For the Greek text, see: Ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων, vol. 1 of Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ συγγράμματα, ed. Panagiotis Chrestou, Kyromanos, Thessaloniki, 1962. For an English translation, see *The Triads: in Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Quietude: A Complete Translation of the Nine Discourses*, trans. Peter Chamberas, Newfound Publishing, Hebron, 2021.

creation in which he is not genuinely present. I want to emphasize here that those theologies separating God's activity from his genuine presence in the world imply a deep incoherence between the Bible and kerygma, between the Bible and dogma.

VI. Gregory Palamas: Energies and theophanies

a. Continuity with Biblical theology

On the contrary, Palamite theology remains coherent with biblical theology because it understands the biblical theophanies and the visions of the Hesychast mystics or the fathers who preceded them as God's authentic activities in creation. And that in spite of the fact that some of his contemporary Byzantine enemies and, in the subsequent centuries, his Latin contenders regarded his position as an innovation against tradition⁴⁹. The continuity with the biblical theophanies is remarkable in the works of the Hesychasts. First, the divine light of the Hesychasts' visions is frequently referred to by the biblical term "glory", which denotes the glory of God the prophets and the apostles contemplated. In *Triads* 2.3.9, Gregory Palamas identifies, for example, the divine light of the Hesychasts with the light which enveloped Moses, Protomartyr Stephen, and Paul the Apostle.

Moreover, in *Triads* 2.3.15, Gregory associates with the Bible the Hesychast vision of the divine light, which is God's heavenly and eternal glory the Son always had in the bosom of the Father. He quotes John 17, 5 to show the identity of this light: "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed". Consequently, this is the divine light of the Holy Trinity that the Son has from the Father. Secondly, the Son asks the Father for his disciples to know it: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you

⁴⁹ The anti-Hesychast writers of the time characterised Gregory and his companions as "new theologians;" e.g., AKINDYNOS, *Epistle* 66.45-50, in: *Letters of Gregory Akindynos*, ed. Constantinides Hero, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, 1983, p. 276.

loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17, 24)⁵⁰. Moreover, Gregory quotes the scriptural passage that establishes the transfer of this glory from God to man: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17, 22).

One of the most remarkable Hesychast documents is the dialogue between Gregory of Sinai, a prominent Hesychast abbot, and a hermit who visited their monastery. His name was Maximos of Kavsokalyvia, where he lived on Mount Athos, and he placed the visionaries of his time in continuity with the prophets and the apostles. Using common words to describe his experience and not philosophical terms, Maximos expounds about the activity of the Holy Spirit, the way the mind becomes all light when it gets near the Holy Spirit and has visions (θεωρία) as those of the prophets and the apostles. Then he mentions two of the most emblematic biblical theophanies: Isaiah’s vision of the Lord on a high throne surrounded by seraphim and Stephen’s vision of Christ at the Father’s right hand. And Maximos continues by stating that “the same way now, Christ’s servants become worthy to see various visions (θεωρία)”⁵¹.

The Hesychasts themselves, therefore, assert a clear continuity with the biblical theophanies. Beyond how we modern perceive them, the way they perceived themselves was that of continuity with the prophets, biblical visionaries, apostles, and Christian mystics who preceded them.

In addition to the biblical foundation, Gregory Palamas was an extraordinary and detailed connoisseur of patristic texts, especially the Eastern Fathers mentioned above. He sometimes uses both Basilian and Dionysian terminologies and identifies Dionysian divine “proceedings” or “processions” with Basilian “activities” or “energies”⁵². However, we can ask why he generally favoured Basilian vocabulary and not that of Origen, Athanasius or Dionysius. I submit that it was because the Basilian distinction between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια was more widely used, including in the councils. The Cappadocian Fathers, Maximus the Confessor, and

⁵⁰ GREGORY PALAMAS, *Triads* 2.3.15.

⁵¹ ΜΑΞΙΜΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΨΟΚΑΛΥΒΗ, in: *ΦΙΛΟΚΑΛΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΙΕΡΩΝ ΝΗΠΤΙΚΩΝ*, Papadimitriou, Athens, 1992, vol. 5, p. 105.

⁵² GREGORY PALAMAS, *One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 106 (in: *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 394) and 122 (in: *Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 403).

John of Damascus employed them, though not as frequent as Palamas, and they are central concepts in the dogmatic formulas of some ecumenical councils. For instance, the Second Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 381-382) differentiated between the unique being or essence (οὐσία) of God and the three divine hypostases (ὑποστάσεις), a distinction that does not disrupt the divine simplicity. Likewise, the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople 681) discerned between Christ's unique hypostasis (ὑπόστασις) and his two types of activities or energies (ἐνέργειαι), specific to the divine and human natures. A systematic mind, John Damascene put together all these concepts in the tripartite distinction between essence, energy, and hypostasis (οὐσία – ἐνέργειαι – ὑπόστασις), the way we sometimes encounter in Palamas.

Therefore, Palamas' distinction between the inaccessible divine essence and the knowable energies is not a theological innovation but part of the Eastern theological tradition. More broadly, it is part of the Alexandrian hermeneutical tradition that philosophically translates the biblical idea of God's genuine presence in creation through a dual discourse about God to secure his simultaneous transcendence and immanence in the world. This theological tradition proves to be an inspired philosophical solution, which proposes a hermeneutical structure coherent with biblical theology on two fundamental aspects: God is present and active both in creation and theophanies. For Palamas, as for the Bible, theophanies are not phantasms created for the eye and mind of the visionary but forms of the genuine presence and activity of God among his people.

b. The essence-energy distinction

From a philosophical and theological perspective, the main question addressed to Palamas' theology regarded divine simplicity. How can God (or His simplicity) not be disjointed when we speak of the godhead in itself and its activities in creation? In fact, at issue was the very biblical principle of Jewish and Christian monotheism. As mentioned above, this question does not have to be asked to Palamas alone but to all the authors who embraced the dual discourse. Fundamentally, it has to be addressed to the metaphysical strategy in itself. In a different study, one may investigate

the answer of all these authors to the question regarding divine simplicity. However, they never thought this dual discourse would infringe God's simplicity because the distinction was not spatial. God's nature (substance or being) does not live in a particular place called *in se*, and divine works or energies are not external to nature, there are no *opera ad intra* and *opera ad extra*. Simplicity belongs to the divine nature or essence.

Gregory answered that divine nature or essence differs from activity, or even glory⁵³. To use Palamas technical terms, glory and nature are therefore distinct, but not as two entities or hypostases⁵⁴. In the same Palamite (in fact, Byzantine) technical terminology, the answer was that the divine glory is hypostatic but not a hypostasis⁵⁵. It is hypostatic in the sense of being real, not just a word. Aristotle would have used the distinction between "to be a substrate" and "to be *in* a substrate" and asserted that the glory is "*in* a substrate" but not "a substrate".

For instance, a plant's green colour has a genuine, actual existence, unlike a world. The green colour is existent, it is hypostatic without being a thing in itself, therefore a hypostasis. Similarly, God's glory is hypostatic in God but not a distinct entity in addition to the three divine hypostases⁵⁶. It is not another divine hypostasis, another divine person, or God, but a property of the three divine persons, as the green colour belongs to the plant: it is real (hypostatic) but not an entity distinct from the plant. Therefore, the glory belongs to the godhead as the green colour belongs to the plant, without becoming a separate entity and, thus, dividing the plant. Hence, the divine glory revealed to the Hesychasts is an eternal quality of the Trinity. In its manifestation, the light does not split the Trinity but rather unveils a particular aspect of it to human knowledge: the eyes of the human soul are opened, and the visionary is allowed to contemplate the heavenly light.

Another significant argument regards the coherence of doctrine about God's genuine presence with some fundamental Orthodox spiritual and

⁵³ E.g., *Triads* 2.3.15.

⁵⁴ *The Declaration of the Holy Mountain* constantly emphasises the distinction between the divine essence and activities; see *Philokalia* vol 4, pp. 418-425.

⁵⁵ E.g., *Triads* 2.3.15.

⁵⁶ *Triads* 2.3.15.

liturgical doctrines. Suppose God is not fully manifest in creation but only a created grace. In that case, two ruinous consequences will follow for Christian spirituality and liturgy: deification - a fundamental Christian moral principle that all the Eastern theologians mentioned above defended - would no longer be possible in a genuine way, but only symbolically. Likewise, the actual, ontological divine presence in the Holy Sacraments and their power to deify those who partake in them, especially the Eucharist, would no longer be possible. Consequently, genuine human deification and the deifying capacity of the Eucharist are possible only if God is fully present and active in creation.

VII. Conclusions: The Role of Uncreated Grace

The above investigation allows us to draw the following conclusions: First, the distinction between essence and energy is not Gregory Palamas' invention but accurately belonging to Basil the Great.

Second, from a broader perspective, this distinction is not even Basil's but part of an Alexandrian philosophical and theological tradition of Platonic origins, which conceives God as the Good, an active principle in the world, through a double discourse: an unseen or inaccessible dimension, philosophically expressed through the idea that the divine "being", "essence", or "nature" is beyond human knowledge, and an accessible dimension, philosophically expressed through such notions as the divine "powers", "works", or "activities" in creation. This strategy is profoundly consistent with biblical theology, which envisions God as active in the world and descending with his genuine divinity, not as a phantasm.

To summarise our conclusions, there are three fundamental consequences of the Palamite and Hesychast position regarding God's true presence in creation and its vital role in Eastern theology and religious life: 1. This position implies a profound coherence between the Hesychast theology and the biblical viewpoint. 2. It implies the possibility of deification because only an uncreated divine grace can deify ontologically

and not just symbolically. 3. It implies the possibility of the authentic, not symbolic, divine presence in the Holy Sacraments and, consequently, of the actual, not merely metaphorical, capacity of the Sacraments to sanctify and deify those who participate in them.