

THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE IN THE HESYCHAST SAINTS ACCORDING TO ST GREGORY PALAMAS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY REVISITED¹

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Does a direct experience of God and the associated grace-filled transformation make people infallible, or can even saints still be wrong when they interpret who can be saved and who cannot, what forms of life people should choose, which political systems, figures and positions they should support? This article examines what St Gregory Palamas says on the nature of the saints' experience and knowledge, how stability and progress are interrelated in his notion of deification, and what the consequences are of his differentiation between knowledge coming from above and natural knowledge.

Among the reasons for the appreciation of St Gregory Palamas in twentieth and twenty-first century theology is undoubtedly his emphasis on the real presence of God in creation, and, in particular, in the human experience of being reached, purified, and transformed by God, who through his grace joins to himself whom he wishes. It could be argued that his essence-energy distinction, or his accounts of the psychosomatic techniques of prayer, all serve this one goal: to defend the reality of divine-human communion. Preserving divine simplicity, on the one hand, and the possibility of human deification, on the other, Palamas argued that the eschatological divine fullness of life can irrupt into this life, as in the case of Christ's Incarnation. Through Christ, it can transform people who are found worthy to see this fullness in terms of the uncreated deifying light. In this article, I will examine the epistemological consequences of the direct experiences of and participation in God. My basic question will be: according to Palamas, does the experience of the deifying light make holy men and women infallible in their theological statements, in their discernment of what are, and what are not, good morals or even good political decisions?

To answer this question, the different layers that we need to be aware of in Palamas' experiential theology will first be considered. Then, the conditions under which

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Palamas speaks about a permanent transfiguration of the saints into the likeness of God will be explored: how he links this transformation to Christ, and in which sense the uncreated deifying light cooperates with human desire and effort. From there we will move to the centrality of the heart and the role of human growth. Finally, the impact of the participatory knowledge of God on orientation in the world will be addressed. We will return to the question of the relation between a realist ontology and epistemology in Palamas. In the conclusion, we will also pay attention to some weak points in Palamas' approach, including the application of his theological principles to his attitudes towards others, especially towards his opponents. With that in mind, we will ask what we can learn from Palamas' experiential theology emphasizing both the unity of and the difference between grace, being and knowing.

Different Layers of Experiential Theology

Palamas claims that 'knowledge of God by experience comes from the grace that grants man the likeness of God'.² This is a starting point for his theology.³ And if we want to take it seriously, we need to bear in mind what Nikolaos Loudovikos stresses as a necessary attitude: 'to respect what we do not possess and consent to learn from Palamas'.⁴ This does not exclude a critical attitude to Palamas' theological interpretation and practical attitudes that emerged from the experiences he had with the holy hesychasts during his monastic life and from his own experience of God. To speak of experientially-based theology adequately,⁵ however, we need to take the testified experience first as a given, and follow its inner logic.

For Palamas, experience has several different layers. First, it is the experience of the holy hesychasts, from whom he learned the life of asceticism and prayer, and whose positions he wished to defend. These include diverse figures. We find among them Theoleptos of Philadelphia, a monk of Athos, later metropolitan bishop of Philadelphia, a firm opponent of the council of Lyons and of reunion with the Roman Catholic Church,⁶ whose spiritual guidance Palamas experienced in his youth, and who, like Palamas himself later on, combined the ascetic life with ecclesial and

² Gregory Palamas, *Triad* III.3.13. I have made use of the English translation by Nicholas Gendle from the selection from *The Triads* in 'The Classics of Western Spirituality' series, in Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 109.

³ Basil Krivochéine has already pointed out, that 'the starting point of his [Palamas'] theologising was his own spiritual experience, not only the study of the holy books of the holy Fathers'. Basil Krivochéine, 'The Ascetic and Theological Teaching of Gregory Palamas', *Eastern Church Quarterly* 4 (1938, reprinted in 1954): 1–67, here 48.

⁴ Nikolaos Loudovikos, 'Initiating the Discussion. For the Fall and Rising of Many: St Gregory of Palamas at the Crossroad of Interpretations', *Analogia* 3 (2017): 1–7; at 3.

⁵ Elisabeth Behr Sigel confirms the importance of such an approach, writing: 'True theology is an experiential knowledge of God'—Elisabeth Behr Sigel, *Le lieu du coeur: Initiation à la spiritualité de l'Eglise Orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), 66.

⁶ See Alice-Mary Talbot, 'Theoleptos', in Alexander Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2056–57.

political engagement. Then there was Saint Nicodemus of Vatopedi, who came to Mount Athos from a monastic settlement near Chalcedon, and who lived '*in fasting and vigil and sobriety and prayer without ceasing*'.⁷ Palamas joined Nicodemus in his hermitage near the monastery for the last three years of his life. After that, in a hermitage called Glossia, Palamas lived with famous hesychasts like St Gregory of Sinai, who brought a method of prayer of the heart from the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai and from Crete to Athos, gathering round himself a circle of disciples, including the future Patriarch Kallistos. This circle played a significant role in the hesychast controversy, even if Gregory of Sinai himself did not take part in it. In 1330, he left Athos and founded a monastery in Parosia, from where hesychasm spread further to Slavic lands.⁸

When Palamas was asked by other monks on Athos to defend their way of prayer and their understanding of grace and participation in God, these would be some of the examples of holy hesychasts he would have had in mind.⁹ The experiential basis of Palamas' theology includes his experience with them, their experience of God witnessed to him and to others, their interpretation of the experiences of others testified to in the tradition, as well as his own experience of God interpreted through the prism of tradition. Thus, in other words, we could say that the experiential basis of Palamas' theology is both direct and mediated. It includes direct experience of God and the hermeneutics of tradition.

This direct experience is joined to tradition in two ways. Even where Palamas speaks from his own experience, this experience is grasped through concepts borrowed from the tradition. The experience of others goes back to the Scriptures and the tradition of the fathers, but it includes also the saints Palamas knew personally. The link to tradition does not in any way minimise the importance of the direct experience of God. However, when spoken about, this experience is mediated. Palamas' experiential theology consists of these different layers of claims to directness and mediation of the experience of God. And while there is a difference if one speaks from one's own experience of God or out of an experience testified by others, in Palamas' theology we do not always know which is which. But we do know that he inhabited the world he wrote about, and in this sense, his knowledge of that world, its spiritual practices, struggles associated with them, and encounters of transfiguring grace ground his theology.

⁷ Georgios Martzelos, 'Saint Nicodemus of Vatopedi, Elder and Teacher of Saint Gregory Palamas', accessed 16/1/2018, published at <http://pemptousia.com/2014/07/saint-nicodemus-elder-and-teacher-of-st-gregory-palamas-the-monastery%E2%80%99s-saints/>.

⁸ See Yannis Spiteris, *Řehoř Palama (1296–1359): milost a zkušnost* (Olomouc: Refugium, 1998), 22–23.

⁹ See Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, I–II, ed. Jean Meyendorff (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Louvainense, Études et documents, fasc. 30, 1959).

Deifying Light and Christocentric Holiness

Now, direct experience of God comes from uncreated grace. According to Palamas, it transforms some people permanently, making them 'receptive of deifying grace',¹⁰ granting them the likeness of God in the 'deification that endures'.¹¹ In support of this position, he cites St Gregory Nazianzen, saying that God purifies people who desire him to such a degree that, 'He creates men of divine character, conversing with them as with friends with those who have attained this state;... uniting Himself as God with gods'.¹² Understanding grace as an uncreated energy of God, as uncreated light, has Christological foundations. Christ, the incarnated divine Logos, both is and gives the light. In John's Prologue we read: 'In him was life and the life was the light of men' (John 1:4). Those who believe in Christ, with this power of life and light, and who receive him, John calls the 'children of God'. They 'were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:13). Palamas draws on this Johannine understanding, according to which being the children of light means being rooted in relationship to Christ.¹³ As participation in the Kingdom of Heaven, such a relationship opens and involves being made capable of beholding the divine radiance of Christ.¹⁴

This eschatological vision is, for Palamas, not just reserved for the afterlife. He defends the claim that the uncreated light irrupts into this life. The prime example is the transfiguring encounter with this light on Mount Tabor,¹⁵ where Peter, John, and James were counted worthy to see Christ transformed by the light.¹⁶ The light goes on to appear to saints throughout the ages, and it is of particular importance for Palamas to stress that this very light, uncreated and deifying, is central to the spiritual experience of the holy hesychasts.¹⁷ As Mantzaridis summarises, 'The light

¹⁰ Palamas, *Triad* III.3.12; *The Triads*, 109.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. He refers to St Gregory Nazianzen *Homily* 45.3 (PG 36:625C–628A).

¹³ See John 12:36.

¹⁴ See Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 34 (PG 151:432C).

¹⁵ The identification of the Mount of Transfiguration with Mount Tabor appears already in Origen in the third century. From the fourth century it became a pilgrim site, and during the Byzantine period churches dedicated to the holy event were built there.

¹⁶ See Matt 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Both Matthew and Mark place the story just after Jesus's saying that there are some 'standing here', who would see—according to Matthew 'the Son of man coming in his kingdom', according to Mark 'that the kingdom of God has come with power'—before 'tasting death' (Matt 16:28; Mark 9:2).

¹⁷ Palamas shows that the transfiguring light illuminated not only the apostles on the mountain, but the saints throughout the ages who have had a share in this light, as they are with Christ (1 Thess 4:17). For him, Moses was radiant with the light when he descended from the encounters with the Lord (Exod 34:33–35), but as we read in 2 Corinthians, Moses had to 'put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendour' (3:13). In those who 'turn to the Lord', the veil is taken away, and the Spirit permits them to behold the glory of the Lord with 'unveiled face', while being changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 4:16–18). The Spirit brings along a realised eschatology, as the light illuminating and transforming the saints; it is the very light illuminating the new Jerusalem, it is the glory of God and the Lamb (John 21:23–24; 22:5). See Grégoire Palamas, *Triad* III.1.10–11, in Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, vol. 2, ed. Jean Meyendorff, (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Louvainense, Études et documents, fasc. 30, 1959),

of Mount Tabor is also that seen by the hesychasts in their mystical experiences, and in the age to come all saints will behold it'.¹⁸ He sees Palamas' position in line with the previous tradition, which interprets Christ's transfiguration in terms of realised eschatology, and identifies the light of transfiguration with the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁹ He says that, for Palamas, 'the coming of the Kingdom of God is not a question of movement from one point of space to another, but of revelation. The Kingdom of God is present everywhere. If the believer is suitably prepared, the glory of God's Kingdom is revealed to him by God's grace'.²⁰

Speaking of human holiness—in particular, the holiness of the hesychasts, whose practices, experiences, and theology he defended—Palamas continued in the tradition of a synergic anthropology.²¹ The stress in that tradition on divine-human cooperation enabled him to hold at the same time the primacy of grace and the value of asceticism,²² the human effort invested into the process of purification. And again, Palamas demonstrates that such understanding has a basis in the Scriptures, where we see holiness in terms of righteousness.²³

The choice of those who would see the uncreated light/the power of the divine Spirit/the Kingdom of God coming in power is made by God. According to Palamas, the transfiguring power of the divine Spirit is 'made manifest, not merely to anyone, but only to those standing with the Lord, that is to say, to those established in His faith, to those who like Peter, James and John have previously been taken by the Logos to a high mountain, that is to say, those who have been elevated above our natural estate'.²⁴ In order to explain that this is possible, Palamas links incarnation and deification. Again, drawing on the Johannine imagery, he says that God descends 'from His own sphere' in order to raise us up 'from our low estate', and that

556–692, here 574–79.

¹⁸ Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 123.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*

²⁰ Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 124. He cites Palamas' own interpretation of Mark 9:1: 'The King of all is everywhere, and His Kingdom is everywhere, so that for His Kingdom to come does not mean that it has to come from another place, but it means that it has to be revealed through the power of the divine Spirit. For this reason He said, "come with power"'. Palamas, *Homily* 34 (PG 151:428C).

²¹ The synergic attitude is based on the interpretation of St Paul's emphasis on people who follow Christ being the 'fellow workers of God' (1 Cor 3:9). The synergic anthropology then draws on St Irenaeus' emphasising that people are created to be alive, and that: 'The glory of God is the living human, and the life of the human is the vision of God'. Irenaeus, *AdvHaer* (= *Adversus Haereses*) 1.22.1 (SC 264:308–310); 2.25.2–3 (SC 294:250–256) *AdvHaer* 3.6.1–4 (SC 211:64–76); *AdvHaer* 4.26.2 (SC 153:330–338). I borrow this inclusive language translation from Mary Ann Donovan, 'Alive to the Glory of God: A Key Insight in St Irenaeus', *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 283–297, at 283. Donovan points out that this motif recurs throughout *Against Heresies* (*AdvHaer*). Irenaeus responds in this way to the Valentinian gnostic postulate of multiple figures involved with the creation, while the one Supreme God remains totally out of any direct contact with it. See especially, *AdvHaer* 1.22.1; 2.25.2–3; 3.6.1–4; 4.26.2; in Donovan, 'Alive to the Glory of God: A Key Insight in St Irenaeus', 286, n.11.

²² See Maxym Lyscak, 'Asceticism in the Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas', *Analogia* 3 (2017): 19–40.

²³ See, for example, Matt 13:43, 49; 25:37–46; Luke 1:6; 2:25. These texts speak of righteousness as a synonym for holiness. Self-righteousness is quite another matter.

²⁴ Palamas, *Homily* 34 (PG 151:428C–429A).

God does this already here on earth, to ‘a limited extent...so far as was right’, so that ‘the uncircumscribed might be contained in a mortal nature’.²⁵

The permanence of the impact of deifying grace does not exclude the permanent need for purification on the human side. On the contrary, without the ongoing purification in which all human faculties need to participate, people might think that they can use the experience of the divine for their own corruptible ends. But the grace of God has no share in such an abuse, and participation in it causes people to lose a share in grace. Palamas states: ‘Indeed, it is impossible to make a bad use of *this* light, for it instantly quits anyone who leans towards evil, and leaves bereft of God any man who gives himself over to depravity’.²⁶ Thus, not only are errors possible but also regression in spiritual life, even for those who have seen the light and have possessed grace. This is how the permanence of grace coexists with the dynamics of purification in Palamas’ thought. Bearing this in mind, we can now ask how, according to Palamas, the deifying experience of God transforms human knowing.

What and How the Saints See

In line with his emphasising that the experience of God does not come on the basis of human effort but by grace, Palamas claims a discontinuity between human created faculties and the direct experiential knowledge of God. As was stated above, he speaks about the knowledge of the saints in terms of seeing in the spiritual light. Palamas says:

This spiritual light is thus not only the object of vision, but it is also the power by which we see; it is neither sensation nor an intellection, but a spiritual power, distinct from all created cognitive faculties in its transcendence, and made present by grace in rational natures which have been purified.²⁷

The knowledge possessed by the saints is not rooted in the senses, in what the eyes see, neither is it rational knowledge, nor even contemplative knowledge based on the capacity of human *nous*. Aristotle Papanikolaou, interpreting Palamas through the lenses of Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas, points out that, according to both, Palamas breaks with the line of thought going from Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen to Augustine and Aquinas, in which truth is linked to human *nous*. Instead—following the line running from Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Dionysius, Maximus, and John of Damascus—Palamas links the truth to ‘the incorruptibility of eternal life’, as Lossky puts it, or, in Zizioulas’s words,

²⁵ Palamas, *Homily* 34 (PG 151:428C–429A).

²⁶ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.17; *The Triads*, 101.

²⁷ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.14; *The Triads*, 100.

to the ‘incorruptibility of being’.²⁸ This is an important insight when we follow the foundations and the content of what the saints know as Palamas describes it, and the authority he gives to such knowledge. In the *Triads* he states: ‘Do you not see that these divine energies are *in* God and remain invisible to the created faculties? Yet the saints see them, because they have transcended themselves with the help of the Spirit’.²⁹

The way Palamas presents the essence-energy distinction affirms that there is no division in God.³⁰ When the saints participate in the energies of God, they participate in God, while God at the same time remains an imparticipable mystery. This antinomy both grounds Palamas’ apophaticism and safeguards it from the agnosticism that he criticised in Barlaam.³¹ For Palamas, the divine energies are ‘unoriginated and endless rays...other than the imparticipable essence of God, and different (albeit inseparable) from the essence’.³² While what the saints see, and the power enabling them to see it, does not come from the human capacity for cognition,³³ what they see and how they see is adaptable to their condition. Palamas puts it in the following way: ‘In the first place, that essence is one, even though the rays are many, and are sent out in a manner appropriate to those participating in them, being multiplied according to the varying capacity of those receiving them’.³⁴

As demonstrated in this article so far, seeing the divine uncreated light, experiencing the deifying grace, and sharing in the Kingdom of God coincide in Palamas. Furthermore, he assumes that there is a multiplicity of ways in which and by which people can see, experience and share, which includes adaptability to the specific condition of each person. The emphasis on the divine-human synergy which runs through Palamas’ theology joins together divine infinity and the human need to

²⁸ See Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 11; he refers here to Vladimir Lossky, *Vision of God*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 34; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 80.

²⁹ Palamas, *Triad* III.3.10; *The Triads*, 107.

³⁰ Joost van Rossum says: ‘The essence of God is “God as He is”, while the divine energies are acts of his free will. God is able to transcend Himself by his own free will, “to go out of Himself”. And that is possible, because He is a *personal* being, or the “Life-giving Trinity”. The act of creation is, therefore, a personal act of God. It is an act of his energies, and not merely of his essence. The divine energies are not impersonal “powers”, like the divine emanations in Neo-platonism, but in “each of his divine energies God is totally present”, says Palamas.... The term “distinction” is often misunderstood as some kind of separation in God. However, it was just a way of saying that God always remains transcendent with regard to created, human persons, though he is able to “go out of his transcendence”. Joost van Rossum, ‘Palamas and Aquinas’, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2015): 29–41; at 35; he cites Palamas, *Triad* I.3.47; III.2.7, *Défense des saints hésychastes* I, 213; II, 657.

³¹ Here I have in mind especially Palamas’ first critique in which he addresses Barlaam’s interpretation of the *Filioque* as something which cannot be proved or disproved on the grounds of syllogism. See Spiteris, *Řehoř Palama* (1296–1355), 24–25.

³² Palamas, *Triad* III.2.13; *The Triads*, 99.

³³ Palamas sees his position in continuity with Gregory of Nyssa as he talks ‘of a vision accessible through the Spirit, not a form of cognition’. Palamas, *Triad* III.3.5; *The Triads*, 104.

³⁴ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.13; *The Triads*, 99.

grow. These are important points to bear in mind as we return to the questions sketched in the opening of the article. Let me now express them more explicitly. If people in the present life can ‘share in the eschatological glory of the Kingdom of God, and receive the pledge of the vision of Him “face to face”’,³⁵ can they, at the same time be wrong in their theological and moral convictions, and in their political views? Let me provide some contemporary examples: denying the value of conversations with Christians from other confessions other than those which would lead to their conversion to Orthodoxy; convictions concerning subordination of women to men in family, in the church as well as in the society; stating that homosexual relations are perverse and cannot be genuinely loving; denying any value to human rights; supporting anti-democratic political systems or political figures with totalitarian ambitions and practices. If we do not want to say that people who hold on to such views cannot have any genuine experience of God, can we go in the opposite direction and say that such convictions really have the authority of the direct experience of God, divinely granted? Such questions are of vital importance when we look at the use and abuse of hesychasm both in history and today,³⁶ and if we want to follow Palamas’ theology while avoiding a simplified black and white distinction between who can have a genuine experience of God and who cannot. Palamas’ practice, as we will see later, might be different, but his theological claims about the supremacy of grace and the impossibility of holding on to grace when one abuses it are very helpful here.

Centrality of the Heart

Wisdom of God and human wisdom (or its caricature) differ radically, according to Palamas, and to understand how the wisdom of God can dwell in people, we need to start by looking at the interaction between divine grace and the human heart.

For the hesychast tradition which Palamas defends, the human heart is central for the right knowing of God, of oneself, as well as of the world. He states: ‘Thus our heart is the place of the rational faculty, the first rational organ of the body’.³⁷ For support, he refers to Christ’s sayings about the heart in the Scriptures: ‘We did not learn this [the centrality of the heart] from any man, but from Him who moulded man, who showed that “it is not what goes into a man that defiles a man, but what goes out by the mouth”, adding “for it is from the heart that evil thoughts come”’.³⁸

³⁵ Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 124.

³⁶ Here I would agree with Pantelis Kalaitzidis who states: ‘Monasticism is the eschatological watchman, the eschatological conscience of the church. And it is precisely this kind of monasticism—that based on the spirit and mindset of the desert rather than on an imitation of heavy-handed political methods—that we Christians in the world so urgently need today’. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy & Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 139.

³⁷ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.17; *The Triads*, 101.

³⁸ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.17; *The Triads*, 101. He refers here to Matt 15:18–19; and Mark 7:18–23. There are other parts of the Gospels supporting the very same point, like Jesus’ saying that a good person brings

The emphasis on the heart as a psychosomatic centre of the human person is thus free of idealisation. The heart is not just an alternative to the concept for *nous*, a way of placing the possibility of understanding God within the human capacities innate in people. The heart needs conversion, and only then, when purified and transformed by grace, can it direct people towards God. There is nothing mechanistic in the mind's descent into the heart and discovering Christ alive and acting there. It is not a process explainable by causal relations. It does not support a reverse movement in which the mind leaves the heart and, while it uses the natural faculties, gives them the authority of what transcends the mind.

Such a reverse movement would be worse than a conviction that one can use human reason for understanding, and human logic for describing, the matters of God.³⁹ When Palamas speaks about what he calls 'natural wisdom', he stresses that, before purification and illumination, it is useless in the most important matters.⁴⁰ Afterwards, when one has received grace, the 'natural wisdom' may become useful, but only to a certain degree, and it cannot be claimed as a spiritual thing sent from on high. The 'wisdom from outside' is not reducible to the 'wisdom from inside' neither before nor after divine illumination.⁴¹

He who has purified his body by temperance, who by divine love has made an occasion of virtue from his wishes and desires, who has presented to God a mind purified by prayer, acquires and sees in himself the grace promised to those whose hearts have been purified. He can then say with Paul: 'God, who has ordered light from darkness, has made his light to shine in our hearts, in order that we may be enlightened by the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ'; but he adds, 'We carry this treasure in earthen vessels.'⁴²

The mind of a holy man or woman is guarded within the body, in the deepest interiority of the body, in the heart. For Palamas, there 'the spiritual mind seeks ever to acquire a spiritual sense', and he rebukes, 'let us not cease to seek that sense since it is in us, yet not in us'.⁴³

out of his/her heart good things, bad person bad things—Matt 12:34–35; Luke 6:45; or his explanation of the parable on the sower, in which he speaks about sowing the word of the kingdom to the heart—Matt 13:19; but also his emphasis on where people's treasures are, there their hearts will be too—Matt 6:21; Luke 12:34.

³⁹ Metropolitte Amphiloque Radović warns that 'Human logic always runs the danger either to confuse or to divide when it tries clearly to describe and to define the mystery...' Amphiloque Radović, *Le mystère de la Sainte Trinité selon saint Grégoire de Palamas* (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 244.

⁴⁰ See Palamas, *Triad* I.1.22; *The Triads*, 30. Natural wisdom, he says, is aided by philosophy, but does not have the power to take away sins or grant eternal wisdom. See *ibid.*

⁴¹ See Palamas, *Triad* I.1.21; *The Triads*, 29.

⁴² Palamas, *Triad* I.2.2; *The Triads*, 42. The quotations come from 2 Cor 4:6–7.

⁴³ Palamas, *Triad* I.2.4; *The Triads*, 43.

The Role of Human Growth

Palamas' position on the continuous need to grow resembles that of Gregory of Nyssa, in particular, his understanding of *epektasis*, a progress first towards and then in God, which, like God, is infinite.⁴⁴ Even saints who have been transfigured by the light of Tabor do not stop there, according to Palamas, as the vision of God develops infinitely, here as well as in the age to come. He argues that 'we do not know and have never heard of anyone from the beginning of time who, having received this vision while on earth, has not desired a still more perfect vision'.⁴⁵ The connecting point between the saints and God here is desire: 'Thus, since the desire of those who have achieved this vision is limitless, since the grace already granted them gives them the power to receive greater vision,...acquiring grace after grace and joyfully ascending the ascent that never wearies'.⁴⁶ For Palamas, 'He who gives Himself is infinite', and hence his infinity grounds also the infinite possibilities for progress of those who are joined to him, those whom Palamas calls 'the sons [we could add, and daughters] of the age to come'.⁴⁷

There are two important points we need to make as we ask what impact the progress from grace to grace in those who already tasted the vision of God has on knowledge involving the human *nous*. First, as was pointed out, Palamas does not place his trust in the *nous*, as it is not fit to comprehend the matters of God. Second, as the *nous* is an integral part of the human person, it participates in the transformation brought by the Spirit in the vision of the uncreated light. The question now is how the *nous* participates in this process, and whether such participation brings along with it an infallible conceptual knowledge in matters of theology, morals, or politics. The provisional answer is: no, it does not. But let me give still some more reasons for this negative response, drawn directly from Palamas' own theology.

Impact of the Participatory Knowledge of God on Orientation in the World

Palamas says that the saints who 'transcended themselves with the help of the Spirit', perceive with their inner senses not only God, but in God also the 'inner

⁴⁴ The concept of *epektasis* is taken from St Paul, from Phil 3:13, where he speaks about himself as '*epekteinomenos*'—striving forward to what lies ahead; Gregory speaks of the constant striving and straining of humankind on a limitless journey towards God, a journey which does not end even after resurrection, but, rather, enters into a new phase, and thus people can never become bored with gazing into the glory of God, as there is always more to see. At the same time, however, humankind will never be equal to God in whom it participates, and to the divine infinity. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I.290–291, in *Contra Eunomium libri I et II*, ed. W. Jager (Leiden: GNO I, 1960), GNO I.112, 9–20. Palamas cites St Dionysius in support of his argument, his saying that even the angels continuously advance in the vision of God. See Dionysius the Aeropagite, *De caelesti hierarchia* 4.2 (PG 3 :180A), in Grégoire Palamas, *Défense des saints hésychastes* 2.11, *Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, vol. 1, ed. Jean Meyendorff, (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Louvainense, Études et documents, fasc. 30, 1959), 340.

⁴⁵ Palamas, *Triad* II.2.11; *Défense des saints hésychastes* I, 340.

⁴⁶ Palamas, *Triad* II.2.11; *Défense des saints hésychastes* I, 340.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

principles of created things, through a simple and indivisible knowledge'.⁴⁸ Reading further, we learn that this knowledge is inseparable from the direction of their gaze, as 'the power of the Spirit' not only 'penetrates their faculties', but also enables them to focus on things 'which are beyond us'.⁴⁹

As the knowledge of God which he defends leads to the realm of the 'supernatural and superessential', it is 'different from all things'.⁵⁰ Claiming that there is a simple continuation of this knowledge, which is absolute, into the realm of the created (into doctrines, morals, political attitudes) would mean, according to Palamas' theology, reducing this difference. It would run dangerously close to 'regarding God as sensible reality', or cognisable reality, something Palamas wants to avoid.⁵¹

Thus, even when someone is not motivated by vices (by a desire to profit or to dominate, to control how the truth can be manifested, and which facets of it should be at the forefront and which in the background, etc.) but by the virtue of service, there remains this difference between the participatory knowledge of God and knowing created things discursively, even when we are speaking about those who were spiritually illuminated. Perhaps, the closer one is to God, the more one is aware of this difference. Knowing other things in their inner principles, as Palamas says, is not the same as knowing the details of how they evolve in time and space in their different stages. Holy people may have what follows through their participation in God, for example, the knowledge of the heart of others, *kardiognōsis*,⁵² but they do not have an infallible knowledge of what exactly will happen to them tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, which discipline they should study, which job to take, which person to marry, which house to buy or which politician to support. And if they attempt to predict such matters, they can be wrong. Tradition does indeed know prophetic dreams and visions, but this is not what I am criticising here. Rather, I have in mind the confusion between spiritual/eschatological knowledge and the realm of assumptions; and there we still need to differentiate between assumptions based on sound knowledge of earthly things, and assumptions which lack such sound knowledge. The first can bring at least some good, the second not.⁵³ Still, in both cases, when the assumptions of religious people are given an eschatological authority of the kind a direct participatory knowledge of God has, it is a sign of regression in the proximity to God of those who do such things. Palamas says that the uncreated light, which was seen and by which one saw, leaves when one tries to put it to 'bad use'.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Palamas, *Triad* III.3.10; *The Triads*, 107.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Palamas, *Triad* I.3.22; *The Triads*, 39.

⁵¹ See Palamas, *Triad* III.3.10; *The Triads*, 107.

⁵² See Luke 16:15; John 2:24–25; Acts 1:24.

⁵³ 'Nonetheless, if you put to good use that part of the profane wisdom which has been well exercised, no harm can result, for it will naturally have become an instrument for good. But even so, it cannot in strict sense be called a gift of God and a spiritual thing, for it pertains to the order of nature and is not sent from on high'. Palamas, *Triad* I.1.21; the translation is from Palamas, *The Triads*, 29.

⁵⁴ Palamas, *Triad* III.2.17; the translation is from Palamas, *The Triads*, 101.

But even such things can and do happen on the spiritual journeys of people and of religious communities. They just need to be recognised for what they are. When this happens, and conversion and penitence follow, learning from such situations can stimulate further growth in one's relationship with God and with one's neighbours. We can see such things even in the lives of the saints. If we return to the foundational image of encountering the uncreated light—that of the disciples, Peter James and John on the mountain of transfiguration—we know that after that experience, Peter will still fall, he will deny knowing Jesus, and also the other disciples will experience being helpless, being without a vision at Christ's cross.⁵⁵ They will not become infallible even after Pentecost when they will have the power of the Spirit, and, as the Scriptures testify, a direct knowledge of God.⁵⁶

Palamas' theology gives space and tools for understanding that the journey of deification involves both progression and regression this side of the *eschaton*. Moreover, even those who were found worthy to experience a share of the future promise, the saints, still pray for the Kingdom of God in which they participate to come; and having a seed of perfection, they still grow towards that for which they pray.

Conclusion

The authority given to the direct experience of God claimed by the hesychast saints is, in Palamas' theology, joined to what he sees as his main principles. Norman Russell expresses it as follows: 'The knowledge of God is not a result of rational inquiry but is a fact of personal relation'.⁵⁷ As we have seen, this principle has a number of advantages and some weaknesses. Among the advantages, we can name that relation always involves more than one party. Palamas speaks about the realism of the divine-human communion. The relation can be experientially known. Palamas is careful in how he links a realist ontology to a realist epistemology. He insists on both the supremacy of grace and the divine-human synergy. His understanding of grace as uncreated is sound, and it helps in seeing human deification as real. His understanding of grace in terms of light, as it is worked with in the Johannine tradition, joins incarnation and deification and shows that the process is Christocentric. The uncreated light grants what we see, but also that we see. Deification is dynamic. Palamas keeps an antinomic relation between the permanence of deification in the saints and the process of growth, involving on this side of the *eschaton* the possibility of error and failing, but also of rising again, and both now and after death

⁵⁵ See Matt 26:34–35, 69–75; Mark 14:30–31, 66–72; Luke 22:31–34, 56–62; John 16:29–33.

⁵⁶ For the direct knowledge, see John 16:25; Acts 4:20; 22:6–9; 2 Cor 5:16; Eph 1:17–19; 1 John 1:1–3; for the fallibility, see, for example, Peter's unwillingness to eat with Hellenic Christians in Antioch—Gal 2:11–14; the disputes and controversies leading to the Jerusalem council—Acts 15:1–29; or Paul's argument with Barnabas concerning Mark, when both are convinced that they are right—Acts 15:35–40.

⁵⁷ Norman Russell, 'Inventing Palamism', *Analogue* 3 (2017): 75–96; at 88.

the dynamics of growth. The human participation in this relation is psychosomatic rather than purely intellectual. The mind needs to descend into the heart, and remain there, in order to be illuminated together with the heart. If the mind moves out of the heart again, and if someone starts claiming divine authority for his/her own convictions, they act outside the divine-human relationship, and lose the relationship until they return.

Now, let me address some of the weaknesses. Aristotle Papanikolaou rightly criticises Palamas, asserting that his approach does not give much space to philosophy and other forms of human creativity, and that he assumes that this is a position shared by all of the Fathers.⁵⁸ The first problem was sufficiently documented in the text of this article. Regarding the second, the unanimity of the Fathers is found not only in Palamas' neo-Patristic interpreters but also in Palamas' own writings.⁵⁹ Rowan Williams makes the following point. Such an assumption grounds the critique of and the opposition to the West, making this 'homogenous, continuous Eastern spiritual and theological tradition...opposed to the fragmented, corrupted, rationalistic divinity of the Western schools'.⁶⁰ A similar point is made by Nikolaos Loudovikos, who states that Orthodox theologians of the last century had the tendency to turn Palamism into the binding interpretative scheme of Orthodoxy: 'Palamas offered an easy schematisation of Orthodox experience, in such a way that the whole of Orthodoxy could be transposed into Palamism, and, in this manner, be turned into an ideology'.⁶¹ However, the roots of this position are already found in Palamas.

In my opinion, however, the biggest problem arises when we seek for a consistency between Palamas' theology and his practical attitudes towards others, especially towards his opponents. One can certainly agree with Spiteris that, without polemics, we would not have Palamas' theology,⁶² but also when following his life and work, at least from what is available to us, one has the impression that controversy is almost

⁵⁸ See Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 11; for the consequences of such a position, see also Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Tradition or Identity Politics: The Role of the "West" in Contemporary Orthodox Theology', *Teologia* 3–4 (2010): 18–25; *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 197–98.

⁵⁹ He claims: 'Moreover, the Holy Fathers affirm unanimously that it is impossible to find a name to manifest the nature of the uncreated Trinity, but that the names belong to the energies'. Palamas, *Triad* III.2.10; *The Triads*, 97. The simplicity projected onto the unanimity of the fathers has a still stronger expression when Palamas projects the simplicity onto the unity of the saints: 'when we refer to one, we mean all saints', this is how Palamas explains Jesus' prayer for the unity of the disciples. See John 17:20–23. See Palamas, *Triad* III.3.14; *The Triads*, 110.

⁶⁰ Rowan Douglas Williams, 'The Philosophical Structures of Palamism', *Eastern Churches Review* 9 (1977): 27–44; at 28.

⁶¹ Nikolaos Loudovikos, 'Ο Μόχθος τής Μετοχής. Είναι και Μέθεξι στον Γρηγόριο Παλαμά και τον Θωμά 'Ακινάτη (Athens: Armos, 2010), 9, cited in Russell, 'Inventing Palamism', 95.

⁶² 'The difficulties with Palamas—even accompanied with violence—appeared already in his lifetime. We could say that he himself emerged as a result of these polemics....If Barlaam and after him Gregory Akindynos and Nikeforeos Gregoras did not provoke him, he would have remained an unknown monk in the Holy Mountain of Athos, of whom we might have perhaps heard at most because of some ascetic or hagiographic writings'. Spiteris, *Řehoř Palama* (1296–1359), 16.

a natural mode of his expression. He started by entering into a controversy with the Messalians, an ascetic group that lived near his first monastery. The twenty-year-old Palamas already then tried to accuse them of error.⁶³

Then, it was he who first attacked Barlaam's position, and not the other way round. Palamas attacked Barlaam for his views concerning the impossibility of defending or rejecting the *Filioque* on rational grounds, and this started the thirty-year-long controversy which shifted towards the grounds hesychasts had for claiming the direct knowledge of God. And if we examine some of his statements against his opponent, it is striking how much they lack charity.⁶⁴ Then, in the same breath, he speaks about the love of God, which leads us to love others, to care for others, to unite us with others; as he cites, it is on the two commandments of love, towards God and towards neighbours, that all the Law and the Prophets hang.⁶⁵ He forgets, perhaps, that the very same love also covers many transgressions,⁶⁶ and asks of us to be merciful as the Father in heaven is merciful.⁶⁷

Having mentioned some of the weaknesses, it would be a grave mistake to reduce Palamas to any of them or all of them together. While Palamas' theology can also be understood as a critique of some of his own positions, we should not forget that it is he who mediates the insights to us. Moreover, just as there are different saints, some personally more approachable, others less, some confirming the goodness in people, others pointing at the danger of their failings, we can appreciate Palamas' important place in this crowd of witnesses. We can rejoice in the reality of God's actions towards them and towards us. Finally, with Palamas' help, we shall not mistake the authority of their experience with infallibility in all things.

⁶³ See *ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁴ Palamas calls the work of his opponents, a following in 'wretched source of heresy' (Palamas, *Triad* III.2.18; *The Triads*, 102). He accuses Barlaam: 'you purposely vilify God and His saints' (Palamas, *Triad* III.3.11; *The Triads*, 108), he says that Barlaam 'has transformed virtue into vice' (Palamas, *Triad* III.3.15; *The Triads*, 111), and that he is left only with the 'dim illumination' (Palamas, *Triad* III.3.12; *The Triads*, 109). Palamas was hard even on his fellow monks. After twenty years of living on Athos, Palamas together with other monks had to leave the Holy Mountain due to the attacks of the Ottoman pirates. On his return, Palamas was made abbot of the Esphigmenon Monastery, but before long he was forced to resign. Other monks found his austerity unbearable. A sharpness of his tone comes across also many years later, when he returns to his bishopric in Thessaloniki, and addresses people gathered in Hagia Sophia with his speech *On Peace*. See Spiteris, *Řehoř Palama*, 21, 43.

⁶⁵ Palamas, *Triad* III.3.15; *The Triads*, 111. Compare to Matt 22:39.

⁶⁶ See Matt 16:14–15; Mark 11:25–26; 1 Pet 4:8.

⁶⁷ See Luke 3:36.