

# Lossky's Palamitism in the light of Schuon

by William Stoddart

Frithjof Schuon repeatedly emphasized that the primary distinction in universal metaphysics is that between *Âtmâ* and *Mâyâ*, between the Absolute and the Relative. Like René Guénon before him, he explained how the Divine Essence or “Beyond-Being” alone is Absolute, and that “Being,” the first auto-determination of Beyond-Being, is already relative. Whereas “Beyond-Being” is God “Unqualified” or “Unconditioned” (*Brahma nirguna* in Sanskrit), “Being” is God “qualified” or “conditioned” (*Brahma saguna*).

God as “Beyond-Being” is the Supra-Personal God; God as “Being” is the Personal God (the Creator, Helper, and Judge). Unlike the Supra-Personal God (the Divine Essence), the Personal God is the Interlocutor with Whom man can speak, and to Whom he can pray. Following Vedantic doctrine, Schuon notes that *Âtmâ* is Beyond-Being, “pure” *Mâyâ* is Being, and “impure” *Mâyâ* is Existence<sup>1</sup>. We have thus reached the classic ternary: Beyond-Being, Being, Existence. The first is absolute; the second and the third are relative.

God as Being, although already *Mâyâ* (the relative), is nevertheless the summit of *Mâyâ* (or “pure” *Mâyâ*). This being so, Frithjof Schuon has applied to Being the paradoxical term “the relative Absolute,” for the good reason that the Personal God (who both judges and saves) is absolute in relation to man. Every metaphysician who, intellectually, discerns Beyond-Being must nevertheless, humanly, obey the Personal god. As expressed on the words of Christ: “No man cometh to the Fa-

1. See “The Five Divine Presences,” in *Dimensions of Islam*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1969.

ther (Beyond-Being) but by Me (Being).” Schuon has also designated “Being,” the “relatively Absolute,” as “the prefiguration of the relative in the Absolute”—and thus, precisely, as the Creator.

To recapitulate in other terms: the principle of Existence is Being, and the principle of Being is Beyond-Being.

In expounding this basis of metaphysics, Schuon followed above all the supreme Hindu metaphysician, Shankara (c.788-820 A.D.); but the primal distinction in question is known to the metaphysicians of all the great religions. In Christianity, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327), who loved paradoxical expressions (no matter how shocking or dangerous) said: “If I had to choose between God and Truth, I would choose Truth.” Eckhart knew, not only that the Divine Essence is Truth, but above all that “God,” in the sense in which he used the term, is “Being” and therefore relative, whereas “Truth”—again in the sense in which he used this term—is “Beyond-Being” (*die Gottheit*), and therefore absolute.

In the Eastern Church, the same fundamental discernment also existed, and was expressed in its mystical theology. Nowhere does this emerge more clearly than in the writings of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Schuon examines Palamitic theology in detail in the first edition of his first book.<sup>2</sup>

The theology of St. Gregory Palamas—essentially apophatic and antinomian—distinguishes between “God as He is in Himself” (*kath’ eautón*) or the “Divine Essence” (*hyparxis*) and “God as Being” (*Ousia*) or the “Divine Energies” (*dynameis*)—the latter being the uncreated attributes or powers through which Being acts and makes itself known. This distinction corresponds exactly to that between “Beyond-Being” and “Being,” as outlined above.

In ordinary Greek, the meaning of these terms fluctuates: *ousía* is sometimes used to mean “essence,” and *hyparxis* is sometimes used to mean “life,” “existence,” or “substance.” However, in Palamitic theology, *ousía* signifies, not the Divine Essence (the Absolute), but Divine Being (God the Creator). The Divine Essence, or “Beyond-Being,” on the other hand, is *kath’ eautón* or *hyparxis*.

In the writings of St. Gregory Palamas, therefore, we encounter the same fundamental metaphysical distinction that we find in Shankara, Meister Eckhart, and Ibn ‘Arabí.

2. *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Faber, London, 1953, pp.176-178



In one of his most brilliant passages<sup>3</sup>, Frithjof Schuon summarizes three different manners of envisaging the Trinity: one “vertical” and two “horizontal.” The “vertical perspective” envisages the three fundamental degrees of Reality (Beyond-Being, Being, and Existence); the “supreme horizontal perspective,” which starts from unity and perceives a trinity within it, corresponds to the Vedantic ternary *Sat-Cbit-Ânanda* (“Being-Consciousness-Bliss” or “Object-Subject-Union”); and the “non-supreme horizontal perspective,” which starts from a trinity and perceives a unity behind it, envisages the three fundamental aspects or modes of Pure Being, namely, Being, Wisdom, and Will. This last is the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), as conceived by “ordinary” (i.e., non-metaphysical, non-mystical) theology.



One of the best known Russian Orthodox theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), who spent much of his life as professor at the Orthodox Institute of Paris. In his writings on the Trinity<sup>4</sup>, Lossky espouses two separate Trinitarian doctrines, one in keeping with the vertical perspective,<sup>3</sup> and one that sticks firmly to the “non-supreme horizontal perspective” (in the terminology of Schuon).

According to Lossky, the Palamitic doctrine of the divine Being (*Ousía*)—or the “Divine Energies” (*dynameis*)—has a bearing on, but is nevertheless distinct from, the customary Orthodox theological doctrine of the Trinity. Whereas, according to Catholic doctrine, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son (*ex Patre Filioque*), according to Orthodox doctrine, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (*ek mônou tou Patrôs, a Patre solo*). In other words, for the Orthodox, God the Father is the sole causal principle of the procession of the Persons or Hypostases. At the same time, Lossky (following Palamas) says

3. See *Understanding Islam*, (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington Indiana, 1994, p.53).

4. See “The Procession of the Holy Spirit” in *The Eastern Churches Quarterly* (London), 1952, pp.41-49; *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Clarke, London, 1957) pp.65-68 of the French original; and “Tradition and the Traditions,” p.16, in *The Meaning of Icons* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1983).

that God the Father is the principle of the “self revelatory procession of the Energies in the Holy Spirit through the Son.” This is something quite different, and Lossky himself makes a cardinal distinction between these two operations: “Personal or hypostatic procession” (which he views in the “horizontal” manner of ordinary Eastern Orthodox theology) and “Energetic procession” (which he views in the “vertical” manner of Palamitic theology). However, he arbitrarily attributes primacy to the former and, in its regard, speaks—most “unmetaphysically”—of “the self-existence of the Trinity” in which there is “an absolute identity of Essence and an absolute diversity of Persons.” According to Lossky, this absolute diversity of the Persons is nevertheless “covered” or “safe-guarded” by the underlying “*mon-archy*” of the Father, who is the *sole* principle of Son and Holy Spirit alike—something that is made clear by the Greek Expression *ek mōnou tou Patrōs (a Patre solo)*, namely the procession of the third Person of the Trinity “from the Father alone.” For Lossky, this is the basic doctrine, and it is only from the starting-point of this conception that one may proceed to the second-mentioned mode of the Trinity, namely, the “self-revelation” of God through His “Energies.” From this Palamitic point of view of “Energetic procession,” he allows that the Godhead is revealed in the Holy Spirit “through the Son” (*diā Hyiou, per Filium*), and states: “The Father reveals His nature through the Son, and the Godhead of the Son is manifested in the Holy Spirit.” He continues: “In the order of divine manifestation, it is possible to establish the order (*táxis*) of the Persons.” Here the Persons obviously constitute a hierarchy, and are not equal to each other.

In his exposition of “Energetic self-manifestation,” therefore, Lossky clearly retains a “vertical” conception of the Trinity; but, as mentioned above, he illogically subjects this to the other mode of the Trinity, that of “Personal procession,” which he views in a purely “horizontal” manner: here the Persons are equal, there is no priority or posteriority amongst them, and there is absolute diversity between them. One is tempted to say that as far as “Energetic procession” is concerned, Lossky retains Palamas’s apophatic point of view, but when he comes to deal with “Personal procession,” he gets caught in the snares of “ordinary” Eastern Orthodox theology—to no less a degree than the non-metaphysical Western theologian gets caught in the snares of “ordinary” Catholic theology.<sup>5</sup>

In seeking to excuse these logical contradictions, Lossky, like many other theologians, takes refuge in the unconvincing stratagem of attributing them to the “mystery” of the Christian revelation—as if Divine mystery were a justification for illogic. Illogic does not “safeguard” mystery, but dishonors it. Divine mystery is *greater* than logic, not *less* than it. The error is to think that illogic can in some way “symbolize” this fact.

One can nevertheless be grateful to Lossky for his exposition of the Palamitic doctrine of Energetic procession, even though he seeks immediately to upstage it with the “ordinary” theological viewpoint on Personal procession—a reflex (and quite unnecessary) failure of nerve and of logic only too familiar in confessional theology. On Energetic procession, Lossky expounds St. Gregory Palamas well, even if, unfortunately, he feels compelled to stifle the implications of his apophatism and antinomianism.



The theological knots are marvelously unraveled by Schuon, who, on the subject of the *Filioque*, writes:

As regards the divergences between Latins and Greeks, we would maintain that the two opposing conceptions are equally true, as always happens in the case of what one might call “extrinsic heresies,” i.e. of doctrines which in themselves are orthodox, but which appear “heretical” in relation to another equally orthodox doctrine; thus, the *Filioque* of the Latins is justified, since the Father has nothing which he does not share with the Son, and on the other hand, the rejection of the *Filioque* by the Greeks is justified because the Son, as such, is not the Father; indeed their distinc-

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5. If the Latin formulation *ex Patre Filioque* (“from the Father and from the Son”) referred only to “Energetic procession,” it would be consonant with Greek Trinitarian doctrine, but, as an expression of “Personal or hypostatic procession,” it is obviously at variance with it. Herein, precisely lies the fundamental divergence between Eastern and Western theologies. In total opposition to the *Filioque*, the Greek view on the procession of the Persons is expressed in the words *ek mônou tou Patrôs* (*a Patre solo*), a formula which emphasizes the monarchy (or sole causality) of the Father as the unique Principle of hypostatic procession. At the level of outward expression, Greek theology appears to approach Latin theology in its formula *dia Hyiou* (*per Filium*); however this, as mentioned above, refers not to Personal or hypostatic procession, but only to Energetic procession, namely, the “self-revelation of the Father in the Holy Spirit, through the Son.” See Frithjof Schuon, “Mysteres Christiques” (in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, Paris, July-August, 1948, p.197, note 1).

tion is affirmed precisely by the different modes of “procession” of the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Son in so far as the Son is God, but is only “delegated” by the Son in so far as the latter is an “internal mode” of the Divinity so that the Son’s “delegation” of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than a mode of His procession from God. St. John of Damascus expressly affirms: “We say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, and we call Him Spirit of the Father; we in no wise say that the Spirit proceeds from the Son, but only that He is Spirit of the Son.” To say that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son amounts in a certain sense to saying that the Son is the Father; if the Latins have not hesitated to attribute the procession of the Spirit also to the Son, it is because, as Essence, the Son is indeed identical to the Father. We say “as Essence” and not “as God” because God is not uniquely Essence, but also comprises “modes” or “degrees” known in theological language as “Persons”; the term “Essence” consequently does not designate the whole Divine Reality, otherwise the Trinity would not be God.

Let us also note here that religious schisms—which must not be confused with heresies in the absolute sense—always arise from the inability of the religious point of view to synthesize two divergent—but complementary—perspectives within the framework of one and the same integral truth.<sup>6</sup>

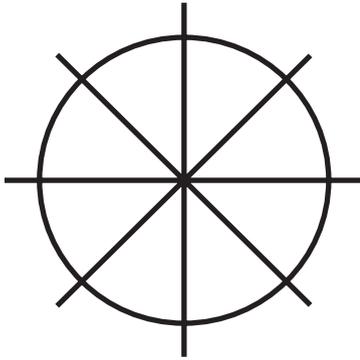


Still on the divergence between the Greek *ek mónou tou Patròs* (“from the Father alone”) and the Latin *ex Patre Filioque* (“from the Father and from the Son”), Schuon brilliantly illuminates both by means of a geometrical image. Schuon refers to God as “Absolute-Infinite-Perfect.” The Absolute can be represented by a point, the Infinite by the radii emerging from that point, and the Perfect by a circumference, which the radii pierce.

This image also serves to express the Christian Trinity: the Father is the point; the Holy Spirit is the radii; and the Son is the circle (through which the radii pierce).

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6. See “Dogme trinitaire et Trinité métaphysique” (unpublished).



Center = Father  
Circumference = Son  
Radii = Holy Spirit

On the basis of this image, the two divergent views on Procession can be expressed as follows: The Greeks look at the radii proximal to the circle and perceive that they proceed from the Father alone; the Latins look at the radii distal to the circle and perceive that they do indeed proceed from the Father but that, passing through the Son, they *ipso facto* proceed from Him also; hence the reason for, and the meaning of, the *Filioque*.<sup>7</sup>



The Eastern Church has always been unhappy with what it calls Western “innovations”—from the *Filioque* of the early centuries down to the declaration of Papal infallibility at the Vatican Council of 1870. The Eastern Orthodox Church accepts the principle of infallibility, but does not believe that it is invested solely in the occupant of the See of Peter (Rome), whom it recognizes only as *primus inter pares*, but not as possessing final authority.

The *Filioque* did not appear in the ancient creeds, but was promoted by the Franks and the Spanish from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards. From the very beginning, it was opposed by the Greeks as an innovation and, from their point of view, theologically unsound. Its official acceptance in 1014 by the See of Rome was the formal cause of the “Great Schism”

7. See “The interplay of the hypostases,” pp.40-42, in *From the Divine to the human* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1982).

between the Eastern and Western “ecumenical” or “general” councils, which took place prior to the split, but not the subsequent councils, which were the affair of Rome alone. By the same token, the Eastern Churches do not recognize Roman canonizations subsequent to the Schism, not even that of a St. Francis of Assisi. Nor does Rome recognize subsequent Orthodox canonizations, for example, that of the great icon painter St. Andrew Rublyón (c. 1360-1440).

At least as regards the outward history of the Christian church, the year 1054 is the most important of all dates. From the beginning, through the sack of Constantinople in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, down to the present day, the *Filioque* has been the source of irresolvable conflict. The critical and dangerous “fault line” that runs north and south through Eastern Europe (for example, through Ukraine and Yugoslavia) is the result of the *Filioque*.