

A Unity with Distinctions

Parallels in the Thought of Gregory Palamas and Ibn al-‘Arabī

by *Peter Samsel*

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Introduction

The interrelation of Orthodox Christianity and Islam has – throughout their shared history – too often been one of political contention and tragedy conjoined with dogmatic theological rejection. Politically, the conquest and hegemony of the Ottoman Turks in the Levant was a cultural disaster for the Byzantines, despite the religious tolerance shown by the Ottomans. Even in present times, in such regions as Cyprus and the former Yugoslavia, the tensions of previous generations continue to persist. While, in a sense, such difficulties have largely conformed to the typical historical pattern of neighboring cultures and civilizations everywhere, they have also served to aggravate the already substantial inherent barriers to mutual comprehension. These barriers have been predominantly religious in nature, centering on the question of the nature and role of both Jesus and Muhammad as understood in each tradition.

Christianity, historically antecedent and conceived as a universal mission, has little “theological space” for Islam in its scriptural and apostolic sources. With the rise of Islam, the Christian self-understanding regarding the nature of Christ as the incarnated Son of God and His associated universal salvific role precluded any theological admission of validity to Muhammad, even on the level of the Hebraic prophets. Islam, historically subsequent and not – despite the preeminence granted to its founder and the disputed question of abrogation – conceived as a universal mission, has, in contrast, considerable “theological space” for Christianity. In particular, the Qur’ān holds an unfailingly positive view of Jesus and a generally positive one of Christians. However, the Qur’ānic understanding of Christianity is not the same as the Christian self-understanding. The figure of the Prophet ‘Īsa (Jesus) in the Qur’ān reinforces the Qur’ānic self-understanding regarding the unity of God, the nature of revelation and the role of prophecy and thus differs in significant ways from the Christ of the Gospels.

Clearly, if any substantial mutual comprehension is to be achieved – assuming of course that such an achievement is desirable – it must be built on bases other than those of raw politics or dogmatic polemics. Perhaps the most fertile basis for such comprehension lies in the respective spiritual paths, Hesychasm and Sufism, that are found at the heart of each of these traditions. Within these spiritual paths, one of the soundest points of intersecting concern is the mutual witness of those saints and friends of God who have achieved holiness and nearness to the divine. Such individuals are figures of universal attraction, and it is relatively easy to conceive of a mutual sympathy and regard manifesting between such figures as Elder Joseph the Hesychast¹ and Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawī,² contemporaries to one another and near contemporaries to ourselves. The remarkable congruence of spiritual method, particularly the practice of continual invocatory prayer of the heart, as represented in the Hesychast Prayer of

Jesus and the Sufi remembrance of God (*dhikr*), forms another natural point of convergent concern between Orthodoxy and Islam.³ A third point of intersection, one that has perhaps not been sufficiently well explored, is that of doctrinal similarity in what might be termed the “mystical theologies” of Hesychasm and Sufism. Such an exploration is particularly important in that these mystical theologies represent the highest self-understanding of each respective tradition. As such, the discovery of real similarities can address dogmatic polemicalisms on an intellectual level, and with a greater force and directness than similarities of either sanctity or praxis.

The two figures that form the focus of this paper, Gregory Palamas and Ibn al-‘Arabī, are the preeminent mystical theologians within their respective traditions, a statement that requires little by way of qualification. This description – “mystical theologians” – while somewhat ill-fitting, has the virtue of capturing the essential nature of their thought. Both were “mystical” in the sense that neither were mere theoreticians, but rather were intensely engaged in spiritual practice and had partaken of the divine illumination granted through such practice. In addition, both were deeply concerned to articulate and defend the nature and validity of spiritual practice and mystical experience to their philosophically and rationally oriented detractors. Both were “theologians” in the sense that, although they were remarkably creative, they were at the same time deeply faithful to the sources of their respective traditions, to which their thought always circles and returns. For Palamas, these sources comprise the Gospels, the Apostolic Epistles and the writings of the earlier Church Fathers; for Ibn al-‘Arabī, they comprise the Qur’ān, the sayings of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*) and the writings of the earlier Sufis. Both might be termed philosophic as well, as neither were strangers to philosophic argumentation and explication. Yet for both, such philosophic reasoning is no more than a tool to be used in the service of cogent expression, rather than as a primary means to Truth. Although neither were systematic theologians, they were at once synthetic and decisive in that they encompassed everything that came before them and shaped everything that came after.

Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), Athonite monk and abbot, archbishop of Thessalonika, eminent theologian and saint, was the most significant spiritual and intellectual figure of Orthodox Byzantium. He was drawn into theological explication through the controversy surrounding the validity of Hesychast spirituality that was instigated by the Greek Italian philosopher Barlaam the Calabrian. Hesychasm, the eremitic way of life dedicated to contemplation and continual prayer, claimed as its fruits the attainment of “quietude” (*hesychia*) of the passions and the experience of the uncreated light, the same light witnessed by the chosen Apostles on Mt. Tabor. Barlaam, arguing philosophically, attacked the theological foundations of Hesychasm, denying that such an experience could be a real knowledge of God. Palamas arose to defend his Athonite brothers and, in the Councils of 1341, successfully defeated Barlaam. His major theological work, *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, although composed as a polemical defense, represents a primary witness to both the content and meaning of Christian experience.⁴ To quote Vladimir Lossky:

It is very difficult to separate the personal doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas from the common patrimony of the Orthodox Church...because the very aim of Palamas’s work was a dogmatic expression of the foundation of that mystical life which is proper to the Orthodox Church.⁵

Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165-1240), the most influential proponent of intellectual Sufism in Islamic history, was known as the “Greatest Spiritual Master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) and the “Revivifier of Religion” (*muhyī al-dīn*). An intensely prolific author, his magnum opus, *The Meccan Openings*, encompasses a vast array of Islamic disciplines: Qurʾānic commentary, Prophetic *ḥadīth*, jurisprudence, theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafah*) and Sufism. This work bears witness to his deep loyalty to the foundations of the Islamic tradition; not only is its content deeply marked by the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, but the very architectural structure of the work relates in the most intricate fashion to that of the Qurʾān as well.⁶ Although attacked by Islamic exoterists such as Ibn Taymiyya and his followers, his influence was and continues to be extraordinarily broad among Muslims concerned with the spiritual and intellectual life. To quote William Chittick:

In the Islamic world itself, probably no one has exercised deeper and more pervasive influence [than Ibn al-ʿArabī] over the intellectual life of the community during the past seven hundred years.⁷

Although not broadly recognized, the thought of these two figures exhibits remarkable parallels, not only in the topics that they address – including the nature of the divine essence, its articulation towards and creation of the world, the paradoxical transcendence/immanence of God in the creation, the nature and potentiality of the human being, and the interplay of divine revelation and human consummation – but also in the answers and descriptions that they provide. Although their vocabularies and means of expression differ, the close parallelism between them suggests that the vision that each grasps, through the contextual lenses of their respective traditions, is in fact the same vision of the Real. In this respect, it may be useful to bear in mind a phrase that Palamas was fond of repeating: “Our religion is not a question of words, but of realities.”⁸

The Essence in Itself

The root of comparative exploration between these two figures should, it seems, begin with the very Root of All. Ontologically prior to any manifestation and disclosure, the Divine in its Essence stands alone. The Essence in Itself is beyond any possible relationship, knowing or dependence. As the preface to the Eucharistic canon of the Orthodox liturgy states, “Thou art God, ineffable, invisible, incomprehensible.”⁹ St. Gregory describes the situation as:

The supra-essential nature of God is not a subject for speech or thought or even contemplation, for it is far removed from all that exists and more than unknowable...is incomprehensible and ineffable to all forever. There is no name whereby it can be named, neither in this age nor in the age to come, nor word found in the soul and uttered by the tongue, nor contact whether sensible or intellectual, nor yet any image which may afford any knowledge of its subject, if this be not that perfect incomprehensibility which one acknowledges in denying all that can be named.¹⁰

This Essence in Itself, or super-essence (*hyperousios*), as Palamas often terms it, is not only unknowable, but also simple,¹¹ independent and “self generating” (*authyparktos kai autopator*),¹² to the extent that it can be described in any positive terms at all.

For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the situation might be most simply stated as, “God is, and nothing is with Him.”¹³ He further elaborates:

...He is independent of the worlds (Qurʿān 3:97), and this belongs to no existent essence save the Essence of the Real – no engendered thing is tied to the Essence, no eye perceives It, no limit encompasses It, and no demonstration gives knowledge of It.¹⁴

God, in the absolute unity of His Essence (*dhāt*) – the One as such – is inaccessible: “He who awaits the meeting with his Lord, let him not associate the One (*al-aḥad*) with adoration of his Lord.” “Unity (*al-aḥadiyya*) ignores and refuses you.”¹⁵

The Articulation of the Essence

The Essence in Itself might be termed the interiority of God, but God in His Essence also possesses certain modalities of being and expression. For St. Gregory, these modalities comprise the Trinity, the three *prosopa* or *hypostases*, each expressing a distinct face and aspect of the divine being.¹⁶ The articulation of the modalities of the Essence finds its generative principle in the *hypostasis* of the Father, which is the sole principle of divinity (*theotetos arche*), its source (*pege*) and cause (*aiton*).¹⁷ Although the Father is “prior” to the other *hypostases*, it is only in this sense that He may be said to be above them: “He [the Father] is greater than the Son and the Spirit, but only in as much as he is their cause.”¹⁸ The three *prosopa*, the persons or faces of the divinity, are not distinct and separate elements, even less distinct centers of consciousness.¹⁹

We worship one true and perfect God in three true and perfect persons, not a threefold God – far from it – but a simple God. For there is not a threefold goodness nor a trinity of goodnesses, but one, holy, revered and adored Trinity, the supreme Goodness, continually pouring out of itself into itself, and divinely existing in itself from all eternity.²⁰

As the Hesychast Council of 1351 – which Palamas presided over – stated, “God is not only in three *hypostases*, but he is also the All-powerful One (*pantodunamos*).”²¹ This unity extends to the domain of the will and operation, or “energy,” of the persons: “God is always like himself, for the three divine *hypostases* possess one another naturally, totally, eternally and indivisibly, but also without mixture or confusion, and they copenetrates each other in such a way that they only possess one energy.”²² As the divine operations stem from a single source, so do the multifarious relationships between the divinity and creation: “The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one source and Lord relative to creation, one Creator, one God and Father, Provider, Custodian and all the rest.”²³

Although the persons do not break the unity of the divinity, they nevertheless possess distinct modalities. At the level of the Essence, the Father is ungenerated (*agennetos*), the Son is generated (*gennetos*) and the Holy Spirit proceeds (*ekporeuetai*).²⁴ In relation to the divine

activities and operations, “We see the individual effect of each of the three persons.”²⁵ More specifically, the one work of creation is “from the Father through the Son in the Spirit.”²⁶ An insightful commentator of Palamas has glossed this as, “The Father is the source and initiator, the Son is the effecting agent, and the Spirit is the completing touch of all divine activity.”²⁷

In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s short collection of mystical odes, *The Interpreter of Desires*, there appears a remarkable verse: “My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the [three] Persons [of the Trinity] are made one Person in essence.” He interprets this verse as, “Number does not beget multiplicity in the Divine Substance, as the Christians declare that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One God, and as the Qurʾān declares: ‘Call on God or call on the Merciful; however ye invoke Him, it is well, for to Him belong the most excellent Names’ (Qurʾān 17:110).”²⁸ Given the isolated appearance and allusive nature of this fragment, it would be dangerous to interpret it broadly, yet the primary insight that the divine substance is articulated while remaining one, is representative of his thought. It is worth noting, in this regard, that the Qurʾānic criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity seems oriented more towards early heretical positions than the developed understanding of the later Christian councils.²⁹

In discussing the externalization of the Essence, the Shaykh uses the term “Level” (*martaba*). It is at the Level that one may speak of “Allah” (“God”) as the Divinity or Lord – terms implying relationship. He writes:

In respect of His Essence, He belongs to His Essence, but in respect of what is named “God” [“Allah”], He seeks the cosmos. The cosmos knows nothing of the Real save the Level, that is, the fact that He is a God, a Lord. So the cosmos has nothing to say about Him except concerning these relations and attributes.³⁰

According to the Qurʾān, God’s “mercy embraces all things” (Qurʾān 7:156), while it is the All-Merciful who “sat upon the Throne” (Qurʾān 20:5). For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the All-Merciful (*al-rahmān*), because of its all-embracing nature, is the predominant face presented by God and is bound up with the very act of creation: “Since God was kind toward us through the name ‘All-Merciful,’ He brought us out from evil, which is nonexistence, to good, which is existence.”³¹ Closely associated with the All-Merciful is the Divine Breath, through which God speaks the cosmos into existence: “God attributed a Breath to Himself, ascribing it to the name ‘All-Merciful,’ only to tell us...that mercy comprises and includes all things...”³² Ibn al-ʿArabī states further:

The Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-rahmān*) bestows existence upon the forms of the possible things, just as the human breath bestows existence upon letters. Hence the cosmos is the words of God in respect to his Breath...³³

This understanding is very close to the Psalm, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth” (Ps. 33:6). St. Athanasius, referring to this text, explicitly identifies the breath with the Spirit (*pneuma*).³⁴

Ibn al-ʿArabī also refers to the reality denoted by the Breath of the All-Merciful in other terms: the Real Through Which Creation Occurs, the Supreme Barzakh, the Cloud, and the Reality of

the Perfect Man, or Muhammadan Reality.³⁵ The term “Cloud” stems from a *ḥadīth* – evocative of the Psalm, “Clouds and darkness surround Him” (Ps. 97:2) – in which the Prophet was asked, “Where was our Lord before He created the creatures?” to which he replied, “He was in a Cloud.”³⁶

The Muhammadan Reality that proceeds from the divine name “the All-Merciful” (*ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya raḥmāniyya*)³⁷ denotes the preexistent essence of the Prophet and fountainhead of all prophetic activity.³⁸ This understanding derives from a number of Prophetic *ḥadīths*: “I was a prophet while Adam was still between water and clay.”³⁹ “The first thing that God created was my spirit.”⁴⁰ “I am the first man to have been created and the last to have been sent [as a prophet].”⁴¹ Also relevant is the *ḥadīth qudsī* (extra-Qur’ānic revelation), “If you [Muhammad] had not been, I would not have created the spheres.”⁴² Ibn al-‘Arabī did not introduce the concept denoted by the Muhammadan Reality, which has a long traditional history, particularly as symbolized by the “Muhammadan Light” (*nūr muḥammadī*).⁴³ For instance, the early Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī wrote, “God created the light of Muhammad out of His own Light....After it, He created the creatures.”⁴⁴

Although these articulations – the All-Merciful, the Breath, etc... – are distinct modalities of Being, they do not break the divine unity: “God declares the unity [of the Real Through Which Creation Occurs] despite the fact that it proceeds from Him. People are bewildered because it pluralizes Him, for there is nothing but He.”⁴⁵

The Articulation of the Attributes and Acts

Ontologically subsequent to the articulation of the Essence, the attributes and acts of God describe the modalities of His operative nature and activity as He descends to the created order. For St. Gregory, these modalities are collectively termed the energies (*energeia*); they are subsequent to the Essence and are its natural manifestations, but are external to the very being of the Trinity,⁴⁶ being referred to as “*ta peri autov*” – the things that surround Him.⁴⁷ The energies are “uncreated,” neither coming into being, nor ceasing to be.⁴⁸

Although the term “energy” or “energies” is encountered most frequently in St. Gregory’s writings, he also uses such equivalent terms as “work” and “virtue”⁴⁹ as well as “...grace, power, energy, radiance, kingdom and incorruption...”⁵⁰ to denote God’s eternal, uncreated activity.⁵¹ The modalities of the energies are indicated by the names attributed to God in Scripture.⁵² Among these, St. Gregory explicitly mentions goodness, eternal will, providence, wisdom, power, divinity, majesty,⁵³ life, immortality, simplicity, immutability, infinity, blessedness and holiness.⁵⁴ Among those Fathers that he cites most frequently, St. Maximus the Confessor and the Pseudo-Dionysius stand out particularly. The Pseudo-Dionysius, in *The Divine Names*, provides a considerable listing:

...they give it many names, such as “I am being,” “life,” “light,” “God,” the “truth.” These same wise writers, when praising the Cause of everything that is, use names drawn from all the things caused: good, beautiful, wise, beloved, God of gods, Lord of lords, Holy of Holies, eternal, existent, Cause of the ages. They call him source of life, wisdom, mind, word, knower, possessor beforehand of all the treasures of knowledge,

power, powerful, and King of Kings, ancient of days, the unaging and unchanging, salvation, righteousness and sanctification, redemption, greatest of all and yet the one in the still breeze.⁵⁵

In language remarkably similar to that used by Ibn al-‘Arabī in describing the All-Merciful, the Pseudo-Dionysius singles out the name “Good” as being preeminent, on the strength of Christ’s teaching, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God” (Matt. 19:17, Luke 18:19):

Let us move on now to the name “Good,” which the sacred writers have preeminently set apart for the supra-divine God from all other names. They call the divine subsistence itself “goodness.” This essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things.⁵⁶

Although Palamas doesn’t discuss the relationships between the Essence and the various energies in detail, he does distinguish between those energies that are intrinsic to the Essence and independent of the creation and those that may only manifest in activity in relation to the creation:

The wise Maximus [the Confessor] thus rightly says that “existence, life, holiness and virtue are works of God that do not have a beginning in time....There was never a time when virtue, goodness, holiness and immortality did not exist.”⁵⁷

He continues, “There are, however, energies of God which have a beginning and an end, as all the saints will confirm.”⁵⁸ These energies, such as creative power or prescience, may have a beginning or end in their external operations, though not as pre-existent in the mind of God.⁵⁹ Ultimately, the names and their correlative energies are innumerable, with only some of them known to us through Scripture.⁶⁰

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the attributes and acts of God are articulated through the Breath of the All-Merciful. These modalities are designated by the Most Beautiful Names – those names, traditionally ninety-nine in number, attributed to God in the Qur’ān, although in their entirety, they are beyond enumeration.⁶¹ “God discloses Himself (*tajalli*)...in His Most Beautiful Names.”⁶² A number of them appear in the Qur’ānic passage:

There is no god but He, Knower of the absent and the witnessed, and He is the All-Merciful, the Compassionate. He is God, there is no god but He, the King, the Holy, Peace, the Faithful, the Guardian, the Exalted, the All-Dominating, the Self-Great, ...the Creator, the Author, the Form-Giver. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names (Qur’ān 59:23-24).⁶³

Of the names mentioned in the Qur’ān, the names Alive, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Generous and Just are often cited as being the most fundamental.⁶⁴ However, the names Allah and All-Merciful are even more significant, given their polysemous nature. These names are both divine attributes as well as articulations of the Essence:

God says, “Call upon Allah or call upon the All-Merciful; whichever you call upon to Him belong the most beautiful names” (Qurʾān 17:110). Here God makes the Most Beautiful Names belong equally to both Allah and the All-Merciful. But notice this subtle point: Every name has a meaning (*maʿnā*) and a form (*sūra*). “Allah” is called by the name’s meaning, while the “All-Merciful” is called by the name’s form. This is because the Breath is ascribed to the All-Merciful, and through the Breath the divine words become manifest...⁶⁵

The name Allah is the “all-comprehensive name” (*al-ism al jāmiʿ*) in that it brings together every divine quality, designating God as He is with the greatest possible inclusiveness.⁶⁶

Ibn al-ʿArabī often categorizes the names in terms of incomparability (*tanẓīh*) and similarity (*tashbīh*), the former including such names as Independent and One, the latter including such names as Compassionate and Forgiving:⁶⁷

There are two kinds of divine attributes: divine attributes which require the declaration of incomparability, like All-great and All-high, and divine attributes which require the declaration of similarity, such as the Magnificent, the Self-exalted, and everything by which the Real described Himself and by which the servant is also qualified.⁶⁸

Although he does not use a separate term, such as energies, to distinguish between the actual operations of God and their denotations in the Qurʾān, the Shaykh clearly distinguishes between the two; “You should know that the divine names which we have are the names of the divine names.”⁶⁹

The names form the *barzakh* – that which stands between two things, both separating them and conjoining them – between the Essence and creation:

The divine names are the *barzakh* between us and the Named. They look upon Him since they name Him, and they look upon us since they bestow upon us effects attributed to the Named. So they make the Named known and they make us known.⁷⁰

The Bringing Forth of the Created World

The operations of God, articulated from His Essence and in accordance with His creative will, act to bring forth the created order. For St. Gregory, this will finds its ultimate motivation in the goodness and love of God: “God’s love calls forth His energies, which disclose themselves in His creatures.”⁷¹ He writes further:

Therefore we must look for a god who not only possesses his own end within himself, his own energy and his own deification but who is a good God – for so it will not be enough for him just to exist in the contemplation of himself.⁷²

God, through the shared will of the Persons of the Trinity⁷³, has created all things by His uncreated energies.⁷⁴ The energies of God penetrate the created universe⁷⁵, forming the essential connection between the Essence and the creatures, which truly live only to the extent that they

participate in the energies.⁷⁶ Although the energies permeate and support the creation, it does not thereby become infinite and coeternal with God.⁷⁷ Rather, it is characterized by limitation and determination, finitude and contingency.⁷⁸ What is created is the effect (*energethen*), not the energy (*energeia*).⁷⁹

The energies, in their multiplicity and differentiation, enter into the creation in diverse ways appropriate to the diversity of created beings:

All created beings participate in God's energy, but in different ways. Some share only in the creative divine energy and not in that which confers life. Others participate in the life-conferring energy as well but lack the wisdom-conferring divine power in which rational beings participate. Finally, only the good angels and godly men have a share in the deifying energy and grace of God, by means of which they approach and resemble their creator. Thus, even though all created things partake of divine energy, only angels and saints are sharers in the divine life, and as a result only these can be seen as truly participators in divinity.⁸⁰

The created beings themselves, given existence through the abiding and enlivening of the uncreated energies, are located prior to the creation as the words (*logoi*) in the knowledge of God.⁸¹ These *logoi* are not created and yet they are not part of the Essence. They are the nonexistent to which God gives existence *ex nihilo*.⁸² As St. Paul writes, God "calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Rom. 4:17). Differing with the Fathers on this point, St. Gregory conflates the *logoi* with the energies themselves – uncreated, yet apart from the Essence.⁸³ He comments:

How could the manifold divine thoughts, and the images of beings to come which these thoughts reflect...be themselves the essence? In fact through them God is in relation with beings, whereas, by essence, he is outside all relation.⁸⁴

For Ibn al-ʿArabī, God's underlying love as the motivating cause of creation is expressed most decisively in the famous *hadīth qudsī*: "I was a Treasure but was not known, so I loved to be known; I created the creatures and made Myself known to them, so they came to know Me."⁸⁵ He comments, "The Breath [of the All-Merciful] emerges from a root, which is Love for the creatures, to whom He desired to make Himself known, so that they might know Him."⁸⁶ He remarks, with respect to human beings, "His love for His servants is identical with the origination of their engendered existence..."⁸⁷

Within the Breath, or the Cloud, the created order is brought forth: "Within the Cloud, God opened up the forms of everything of the cosmos beside Himself."⁸⁸ This bringing forth is governed by the divine command "Be!": "Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!'" (Qur'ān 16:40). The created beings come into manifestation through conjoining with the properties of the divine names. These properties, manifested within the created beings – such as life, compassion or knowledge – can be traced back to the divine attributes.⁸⁹ The created beings are, in fact, nothing other than the properties or effects of the divine names.⁹⁰ "To God belong the Most Beautiful Names, and to the cosmos belongs manifestation through the names by assuming their traits."⁹¹ The Shaykh explains further: "No property becomes manifest within

existence without a root in the Divine Side by which it is supported.”⁹² “The ‘divine support’ is the fact that the divine names are the support for the loci (*mahāll*) [created beings] wherein their own effects exist, so that the levels of the names may become designated.”⁹³

Although the divine names enter into creation, it is nevertheless characterized by imperfection and poverty relative to the Real:

When He made the creatures manifest, He bestowed upon them those names which He willed to bestow and actualized the creatures through them. Creation stands in the station of imperfection because of its possibility and its poverty toward someone to give preponderance [to its existence over its nonexistence].⁹⁴

The created beings, or existent things, given existence and manifestation by God, are known to Him prior to the creation as the immutable entities (*‘ayn thābita*) or possible things (*mumkin*).⁹⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī finds a reference to this in the Qur’ānic passage, “There is no thing whose treasures are not with Us” (Qur’ān 15:21). For the Shaykh, these “treasures” are the immutable entities,⁹⁶ existent in God’s knowledge but nonexistent in the creation: “Although the possible thing exists, it has the property of the nonexistent thing.”⁹⁷ It is these entities that are given existence by God and form the entire created order through being the loci for the properties of the divine names: “Every entity was nonexistent in itself and known to Him, and He loved to bring it into existence.”⁹⁸

Between Unknowability and Disclosure

Although God in the interiority of His Essence is never known, He is known to His creatures through the disclosure of His nature in their own properties. Although God has made Himself multiple, through the articulation of His Essence, His operations and His creatures, He remains singular and undivided. God embraces, in a mysterious and antinomic manner, the extremes of identity and real difference, of presence with His creatures and absence in His interiority.

The Gospels themselves give voice to this mystery: “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1.18), “...the pure in heart, ...they shall see God” (Matt. 5.8). St. John writes in one and the same Epistle: “No one has seen God at any time” (1 John 4:12), and “...we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). How are these statements to be reconciled? For St. Gregory, “It is right for all theology which wishes to respect piety to affirm sometimes one and sometimes the other when both affirmations are true.”⁹⁹ He explains further:

The divine nature must be called at the same time incommunicable and, in a sense, communicable; we attain participation in the nature of God and yet he remains totally inaccessible. We must affirm both things at once and must preserve the antinomy as the criterion of piety.¹⁰⁰

Expressing the full paradox of the situation, he writes: “He is being and not being; he is everywhere and nowhere; he has many names and cannot be named; he is both in perpetual movement and immovable; he is absolutely everything and nothing of that which is.”¹⁰¹

Despite the apparent differentiation of God into hierarchy and multiplicity, He remains singular. Palamas, upholding the doctrine of the divine simplicity, repudiates any suggestion that God's nature could be "composite" (*synthetos*).¹⁰² He writes, "God is one, He is at the same time incomprehensible (*akataleptos*) in His essence, and comprehensible in His energies by the creature."¹⁰³ Explaining further, he remarks, "God does not lose his simplicity either because of the division and distinction of the *hypostases* [of the Trinity], or because of the division and multiplicity of the powers and energies."¹⁰⁴ Because of His simplicity and singularity, His transcendence of the categories of whole and parts, He is not merely present in His *hypostates* and energies, but wholly and fully so:¹⁰⁵

Goodness is not one part of God, Wisdom another, and Majesty or Providence still another; God is wholly Goodness, wholly Wisdom, wholly Providence and wholly Majesty; for He is one, without any division into parts, but, possessing in Himself each of these energies, He reveals Himself wholly in each by His presence and His action in a unified, simple and undivided fashion.¹⁰⁶

The antinomic tension between God's hidden and revealed nature can in no way be resolved through any partitioning of Him:

That which is manifest, that which makes itself accessible to intellection or participation, is not part of God, for God is not thus subject to partition for our benefit; complete he manifests himself and does not manifest himself, complete he is conceived and is inconceivable by the intelligence, complete he is shared and is imparticipable.¹⁰⁷

Although God is simple by nature, there is no identity between His essence, on the one hand, and His energies and creation, on the other; otherwise, creatures would be gods by nature and God would no longer be a one, but a many. However, there is not a real difference either; for then God would be cut off from the created order and no connection with Him would be possible.¹⁰⁸ In a sense, both positions must be embraced: "In a certain sense, essence and energy are identical in God, but in another sense, they are different."¹⁰⁹ Palamas makes use of a number of expressions to provide a glimpse of the situation, speaking of "a union without confusion, a distinction without division,"¹¹⁰ and of the "undivided division" (*adiaireton diairesin*).¹¹¹ Most typically, he speaks of the relationship between God's essence and energies as a "real distinction" (*pragmatike diakrisis*), contrasting this to both a "real division" (*pragmatike diairesis*), which would destroy the divine unity and simplicity, and a "rational distinction" (*diakrisis kat epinoian*), which would possess only subjective existence.¹¹²

Although the divine Essence is incommunicable to the creatures, we should not conceive of it as being therefore absent from creation. In fact, it is present everywhere: "Everywhere there is present indivisibly something of the divine essence; the divine energies are shared with the creatures...the divine nature is never shared."¹¹³ "...for the divine nature is everywhere present, but it is incommunicable, for no created being...would be able to partake of it."¹¹⁴ In a remarkable passage, St. Gregory describes how the divine essence "multiplies itself" and shares itself with the creatures, while remaining indivisible:

There is therefore a reality between creatures and the imparticipable superessentiality; not one sole reality, but as many as the objects which share therein; I want to speak about these mediating realities; they are powers of the Superessentiality which, in a unique and unifying way, possesses by anticipation and resumes in itself all the multitude of the participable realities; because of this multitude, it multiplies itself in its manifestations and all creatures share in it, although it remains indivisibly within its imparticipability and unity.¹¹⁵

In this regard, it is worth noting that this sense of multiplicity in unity extends to the divine energies as well, where Palamas writes of the divine energies both in the singular and in the plural; the singular – “energy” – relating to the essence as its source of manifestation, and the plural – “energies” – relating to the multiple created beings that they participate in.¹¹⁶

The Qur’ān also expresses the inherent paradox of God’s relationship to His creation in many verses – such as, “He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest” (Qur’ān 57:3) – but perhaps most remarkably in the combined verse, “Nothing is like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Qur’ān 42:11). Ibn al-‘Arabī comments:

He declares Himself similar (*tashbīh*) in one place and incomparable (*tanzīh*) in another. He declares Himself incomparable through His words, “Nothing is like Him,” and similar through His words, “And He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Qur’ān 42:11). Hence thoughts of similarity were dispersed, and thoughts of incomparability were scattered.¹¹⁷

Explaining the situation further, he describes in blunt philosophical terms how God embraces both incomparability and similarity, nondelimitation and delimitation:

He is not declared incomparable in any manner that will remove Him from similarity, nor is He declared similar in any manner that will remove Him from incomparability. So do not declare Him nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished, then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He.¹¹⁸

Most typically, the Shaykh uses the term *wujūd*, meaning being, existence and finding, to designate how God may be found, both to Himself and in the creation.¹¹⁹ Just as God is One, so is *wujūd*, whether in reference to the divine Being or the existence of the created things. He asserts the unicity of *wujūd* in various ways: “There is nothing in *wujūd* but He, and *wujūd* is acquired only from Him. No entity of any existent thing becomes manifest except through His self-disclosure.”¹²⁰ “The Real says, ‘There is no thing to which I manifest Myself, because I am identical with each thing.’”¹²¹ “The Entity is one in *wujūd*, but the relations pertain to nonexistence, and in them the diversity occurs.”¹²² And yet, while all might be said to be *wujūd*, *wujūd* itself carries distinctions, being both uncreated and created:

Concerning the entities of the cosmos, it is said that they are neither identical with the Real, nor other than the Real. On the contrary, *wujūd* is all Real. However, some of what is Real is described as created, and some is described as not created, while all of it is existent.¹²³

Ibn al-ʿArabī often uses the phrase “He/not He” (*huwa lā huwa*)¹²⁴ to describe the ambiguity of the cosmos; everything is and is not God. Citing a Qurʾānic verse, “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (Qurʾān 8:17), referring to the Prophet’s symbolic throwing of sand in the direction of the enemy at the battle of Badr, the Shaykh comments:

There is none in *wujūd* [Being/existence] but God. But the clear formulation of this question is terribly difficult. Verbal expression falls short of it and conceptualization cannot define it, because it quickly escapes and its properties are contradictory. It is like his words, “You did not throw,” so He negated, “when you threw,” so He affirmed, “but God threw,” so He negated the engendered existence (*kawn*) of Muhammad and affirmed Himself as identical (*ʿayn*) with Muhammad, since He appointed for him the name “God.”¹²⁵

Although ambiguously present, He is everywhere so. Just as the Qurʾān testifies that, “He is with you wherever you are” (Qurʾān 57:4), and “He is nearer than the jugular vein” (Qurʾān 50:16), so Ibn al-ʿArabī remarks that, “Since the Being of the Real permeates the cosmos, no one denies Him.”¹²⁶ God, In entering into creation, remains one, while becoming paradoxically multiple. He describes the situation:

Though Being is One Entity, the entities of the possible things have made It many, so It is the One/Many (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*)...Without Him, we would not be found, and without us, He would not become many through the many attributes and the names diverse in meaning which He ascribes to Himself.¹²⁷

And yet His very multiplicity devolves to Unity, even in the context of the divine names, in which God multiplies Himself into various aspects and properties. In discussing the divine names, Ibn al-ʿArabī remarks that the names – denoting various aspects of *wujūd*’s perfections – have no independent existence, since they are merely relationships between *wujūd* and the nonexistent things: “The cosmos is restricted to entities and relations. The entities pertain to *wujūd*, while the relations are intelligible and pertain to nonexistence. This is everything other than God.”¹²⁸

The Divine Image

Among all the created beings, all the many loci of manifestation, the human being is utterly unique, endowed with characteristics that render him both more “like God” and more comprehensive in his nature than anything else in the cosmos. In Genesis, we find, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The Church Fathers express a diversity of understandings of in what sense man may be taken to be the “image” of God; For St. Maximus the Confessor, man as “image” is characterized by “being” and “eternity,”¹²⁹ for Gregory of Nyssa, the primary characteristics are “intellect” and “free will.”¹³⁰ Palamas substantially agrees with this, identifying the “image” with man’s noetic faculties and the freedom which he possesses to obtain moral perfection.¹³¹ He writes:

For that which is in the image resides not in the body but in the intellect, which is the highest aspect of human nature. If there was something else still higher, that which is in the image would reside in that.¹³²

And yet, although the intellect is preeminent, the body also represents something of the image: “The word Man is not applied to either soul or body separately, but to both together, since together they have been created in the image of God.”¹³³ As image, man was made a microcosm (*mikrokosmos*) in which is summarized and recapitulated all the rest of creation. As such, man embraces and beautifies both the visible and the invisible worlds.¹³⁴

In the same passage of Genesis, there appears, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Here, the Fathers often distinguish “image” as a granted state, whereas “likeness” implies a state *in potentia* but not yet achieved.¹³⁵ Specifically, for St. Gregory, as for the Fathers generally, the “image” represents man’s potentiality to attain perfection in God, while the “likeness” is the condition of attained perfection.¹³⁶ He writes, “...all men are in the image of God, and perhaps also in His likeness.”¹³⁷ The likeness is, in fact, equivalent to the deification (*theosis*) of man.¹³⁸

According to a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, “God [Allah] created Adam upon His own form (*sūra*).”¹³⁹ Here, Ibn al-‘Arabī finds significance in the mention of the name “Allah,” the all-comprehensive name: “For the Prophet reported that God created Adam in His form, and the human being has brought together the whole cosmos.”¹⁴⁰ By virtue of this all-comprehensiveness, “There is no divine name of which we do not possess a portion.”¹⁴¹ The “form” is bound closely with another concept; man’s “primordial nature” (*fiṭra*): “...God’s primordial nature (*fiṭra*), in keeping with which He brought forth (*faṭara*) human beings” (Qur’ān 30:30). The Shaykh comments:

When God created the human spirit, he created it perfect, fully developed, rational, aware, having faith in God’s unity (*tawḥīd*), admitting His lordship. This is the primordial nature (*fiṭra*) according to which God created human beings.¹⁴²

Being created in the all-comprehensive form, man is the microcosm, possessing concentratedly all the properties of the cosmos:

God created the cosmos outside of the human being only as the striking of a likeness for the human being, that he might know that everything that becomes manifest in the cosmos is within himself and that the human being is the Intended Entity. He is the totality of the wisdoms, and for his sake were created the Garden and the Fire, this world and the last world, all the states, and the hownesses. Within him becomes manifest the totality of the divine names and their traces.¹⁴³

To fully manifest the form is to fully honor the “Trust” (*amāna*) granted to man by God.¹⁴⁴ The Qur’ān obliquely describes the obligation imposed by the Trust: “God commands you to deliver trusts back to their owners” (Qur’ān 4:58). Commenting on the verse, the Shaykh writes that, “...the attributes of the Real are a trust with the servant.”¹⁴⁵ To honor and deliver the Trust is precisely to fully manifest the all-comprehensive form.¹⁴⁶ He writes:

God created Adam upon His own form. Hence He ascribed to him all His Most Beautiful Names. Through the strength of the Form he was able to carry the offered Trust. The reality of the Form did not allow him to reject the Trust in the way that the heavens and the earth refused to carry it.¹⁴⁷

Divine Initiative and Human Transformation

Although we, as human beings, are cast in the divine mold or stamp, our capacity to fully manifest and unite ourselves with the divine qualities must be brought from a state of potentiality to one of completion. However, we in ourselves are incapable of such a transformation – this is precisely the role of divine initiative and guidance. For St. Gregory and the Fathers, Christ, by incarnating as man, is absolutely fundamental to such a possibility of transformation. Christ, quoting the Psalms, declared, “I say, ‘You are gods’” (John 10:34). St. Athanasius, inspired by these words, summarized the purpose of the Incarnation as: “He was made man, that we might be made god.”¹⁴⁸ Palamas, affirming this, holds that the main purpose of the Incarnation is the “union” (*henosis*) of the divine with the human.¹⁴⁹ In the incarnation, the “first fruits of our substance” were deified: “He renewed, not our *hypostasis* [unique to each person], but our nature, which He assumed, united to it in His own *hypostasis*.”¹⁵⁰ Christ also acts as teacher and guide:

Salvation is through the Logos. The Logos, who is God the Son, became man to make us like Him through repentance and by counseling (*symbolen*). We are as far away from the Kingdom of God “as the heavens are from the earth,” but the union (*henosis*) is made possible by the willingness of the Incarnate Logos.¹⁵¹

The guidance of Christ, “through repentance and by counseling,” a guidance that both encompasses and internalizes the Mosaic Law, is essential to our transformation: “I did not come to destroy [the Law] but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). St. Gregory explains:

Did He not deign to make His dwelling in man, to appear to him and speak to him without intermediary, so that man should be not only pious, but sanctified and purified in advance in soul and body by keeping the divine commandments, and so be transformed into a vehicle worthy to receive the all-powerful Spirit?¹⁵²

Yet the most significant means by which man becomes transformed are the sacraments, the created media that vehicle the uncreated and deifying grace of God.¹⁵³ Of the sacraments, the two that Palamas considers the most decisive are baptism and the Eucharist:¹⁵⁴ “On these two acts [baptism and the Eucharist] depends our entire salvation, for in them is recapitulated the whole of the divine-human economy.”¹⁵⁵ In baptism, the Holy Spirit regenerates human nature, purifying man “in the image” and granting him the power, lost by the fall, to achieve likeness to God.¹⁵⁶ It is this entry into the Church, the body of Christ, and renewal through grace that St. Paul attests to: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 4:7). Although baptism purifies man’s “image,” the Eucharist brings about his advance towards the “likeness.”¹⁵⁷ Through partaking of the Eucharist, the sacramental union with Christ, man, in his individual *hypostasis*, attains a real union with His deifying grace and energy.¹⁵⁸

Since the Son of God, in his incomparable love for man, did not only unite His divine *Hypostasis* with our nature, by clothing Himself in a living body and a soul gifted with intelligence...but also united himself...with the human *hypostases* themselves, in mingling himself with each of the faithful by communion with his Holy Body...¹⁵⁹

This union with divine energy and grace in the Eucharist finds its prefiguration in the witnessing of the uncreated light by the Apostles on Mt. Tabor: “And He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matt. 17:2). Palamas continues:

For, on the day of the Transfiguration, that Body, source of the light of grace, was not yet united with our bodies; it illuminated from outside those who worthily approached it, and sent the illumination into the soul by the intermediary of the physical eyes; but now, since it mingles with us and exists in us, it illuminates the soul from within.¹⁶⁰

In Islam, God’s Word does not become incarnated, but inlibrated; it is the descent of the Qur’ān to the Prophet and his community that forms the proper parallel for consideration to the incarnation of Christ. This descent is not associated with a direct regeneration of human nature, as man is not considered to be in a state of fall, but rather is predominantly associated with guidance, since the fundamental problem of man is persistent human forgetfulness and heedlessness. As the human being is called upon by the Trust to fully manifest the all-comprehensive form of his creation, the guidance provided must be similarly all-comprehensive. Just as “Allah” is the all-comprehensive name of God, the very name of the Book, *qur’ān*, signifies “gathering” and “bringing together.”¹⁶¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī comments, “The Qur’ān is one book among others except that, to the exclusion of all other books, it alone possesses all-comprehensiveness (*jam‘iyya*).”¹⁶²

This all-comprehensiveness, which the Qur’ān possesses, is shared by the nature of the Prophet himself, who is the perfected locus of manifestation for the divine name “Allah.”¹⁶³ The Shaykh remarks, “Muhammad was the greatest locus of divine self-disclosure...since he was given the all-comprehensive words.”¹⁶⁴ The association of the nature of the Prophet with the Qur’ān finds further definition in the *ḥadīth* in which ‘Ā’isha, the wife of the Prophet, stated, “Surely the character of the Prophet was the Qur’ān.”¹⁶⁵ – a character that the Qur’ān describes as “tremendous.” He explains:

God says, “Surely thou [Muhammad] art upon a tremendous character (*khuluq ‘azīm*)” (Qur’ān 68:4). ...When ‘Ā’isha was asked about the character of the Messenger of God, she answered, “His character was the Qur’ān.” She said that because he was unique in character, and that unique character had to bring together all noble character traits. God described that character as being “tremendous,” just as He described the Qur’ān in His words, “the tremendous Qur’ān” (Qur’ān 15:87). So the Qur’ān is his character. If a person in the community of the Messenger who has not met the Messenger of God desires to see him, let him look upon the Qur’ān. When he looks upon it, there is no difference between looking upon it and looking upon God’s Messenger. It is as if the Qur’ān takes the configuration of a corporeal form which is named Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.¹⁶⁶

It is the *sharīʿa*, the divine Law derived from the teaching of the Qurʾān and the example of the Prophet, that codifies the all-comprehensive guidance that human beings stand in need of if they are to attain felicity, even more so if they are to fully deliver the Trust. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the *sharīʿa* is not merely the pointer to or symbol of the *haqīqa* (the Real, the divine Truth); it is the *haqīqa*.¹⁶⁷ The traveler to God must cling to its rulings and guidance: “He must move forward according to the scale of knowledge derived from the revealed Law.”¹⁶⁸ “Beware lest you throw the Scale of the Law from your hand...”¹⁶⁹ Although the Law is silent on certain subjects, this silence is in fact an aspect of its all-comprehensiveness and plenitude;¹⁷⁰ as the Qurʾān states, “Do not ask us about those things that, if they were shown to you, would bring you wrong” (Qurʾān 5:101).

Of the prescriptions set down by the Law, none is more central than the *ṣalāt*, the ritual prayer. Two *ḥadīths* speak of the remarkable depths contained in this activity, an activity associated in the Qurʾān with God Himself, as in the passage, “It is He who does *ṣalāt* over you...” (Qurʾān 33:43). “Each of you, when you pray, has an intimate talk with the Lord,”¹⁷¹ and “Prayer is the ascension (*miʿrāj*) of the believer.” In this second *ḥadīth*, the *ṣalāt* is compared to the heavenly ascension of the Prophet during the Night Journey,¹⁷² in the course of which the *ṣalāt* itself was instituted by God.¹⁷³ As the Qurʾān states, attesting to the intimacy inherent in the ritual prayer, “Bow in prostration and draw near” (Qurʾān 96:19).

The recitation of the Qurʾān, which forms a fundamental part of the ritual prayer, is an arena of intimacy in which God and His Word are made present in the heart of the believer: “When the Qurʾān ...descends upon the heart, it is then He Whose Word the Qurʾān is that descends with it.”¹⁷⁴ The Shaykh explains further in a remarkable passage:

It is I, He says, who recite My Book for him with his tongue while he listens to Me. And that is My nocturnal conversation with him. That servant savors My Word. But if he binds himself to his own meanings, he leaves Me by his reflection and his meditation. What he must do is only lean toward Me and leave his ears receptive to My Word until I am present in his recitation. And just as it is I who recite and I who make him hear, it is also I who then explain My Word to him and interpret its meanings....And he is at that moment a witness, present with Me; and it is I who take charge of his instruction.¹⁷⁵

The Consummation of the Human Being

The human being, created with the potentiality for perfection and union, strengthened to that end through the grace and guidance of revelation, may come to fully manifest the divine image through a union with the manifested divine qualities. In Orthodoxy, the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Isaiah, “The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:2), represent partial modalities of human perfection through grace. St. Paul speaks of men having “gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us” (Rom. 12:6), and that “There are diversities of gifts but the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4). There is no special distinction between these gifts and grace itself.¹⁷⁶

Man, although partaking of these partial gifts, may enter into yet a more complete union with the divine. St. Peter writes of the potentiality for human beings to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). St. Gregory affirms that the saints participate in the divine nature, but through union with the energies, and not the essence;¹⁷⁷ they become “gods by grace,” as he affirms, quoting St. Maximus.¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere, St. Maximus writes that, “God and the saints had one and the same energy.”¹⁷⁹ This union or deification (*theosis*) is taught by St. Gregory and the Fathers to be both God’s greatest gift to man and the ultimate goal of human existence.¹⁸⁰

Through the life of holiness, the grace of the sacraments and the action of continual prayer, man enters into a state of readiness for deification, which is completed through the active grace of God.¹⁸¹ “By grace, God totally embraces those who are worthy, and the saints embrace God in his fullness.”¹⁸² This union with the energy is conjoined with its vision, where – as was the case on Mt. Tabor – the vision of the uncreated energy of God is perceived by the spiritual eye as light. Palamas explains:

He who participates in the divine energy, himself becomes, to some extent, light; he is united to the light, and by that light he sees in full awareness all that remains hidden to those who have not this grace; thus, he transcends not only the bodily senses, but also all that can be known by the intellect...for the pure in heart see God...who being Light, dwells in them and reveals Himself to those who love Him, to His beloved.¹⁸³

In another remarkable passage, he explains further how contemplation of the uncreated light is only through union with it:

Having separated itself from all other beings, it becomes itself all light and is assimilated to what it sees, or rather, it is united to it without mingling, being itself light and seeing light through light. If it sees itself, it sees light; if it beholds the object of its vision, that too is light; and if it looks at the means by which it sees, again it is light. For such is the character of the union, that all is one, so that he who sees can distinguish neither the means nor the object not its nature, but simply has the awareness of being light and of seeing a light distinct from every creature.¹⁸⁴

As mentioned previously, Palamas uses the terms “energy,” “light” and “grace” nearly synonymously, but with distinct shades of meaning – energy refers generally to God’s creative operation and manifestation, light refers to the contemplated manifestation of God in the experience of the saints, and grace refers to the operation of God in the salvific action of the Holy Spirit. As he explains, “The divine and deifying illumination and grace are not the substance (*ouisa*), but the energy of God.”¹⁸⁵

Since the divine nature is infinite and inexhaustible, deification is in no way a state of static completion – man, even in a state of union, cannot encompass the whole of God.¹⁸⁶ In this sense, deification, while a real union, is not exhaustive: “Every man worthy of it participates differently in the great gift of the Spirit; this corresponds to the degree of his own purity, mingling with the harmony of that Beauty.”¹⁸⁷ “What one receives is never more than a part of what is given; he who receives the divine energy cannot contain the whole of it.”¹⁸⁸ Additionally, deification is a dynamic participation and vision: “The contemplation of this light is a union, even though it does

not endure with the imperfect.”¹⁸⁹ “This contemplation has a beginning, and something follows on from this beginning, more or less dark or clear; but there is never an end, since its progress is infinite...”¹⁹⁰

The man who is deified becomes, in a sense, “uncreated” by grace through participation in the uncreated energy of God. At the same time, he does not cease to be a creature, nor does he lose his natural identity. Rather, he acquires a new condition, that of being a sharer in the divine life.¹⁹¹ Palamas provides a glimpse into the nature of such a state:

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. As we read: “He who has been found worthy to enter into God will perceive preexisting in God all those inner principles of created things, through a simple and indivisible knowledge.”¹⁹²

In a remarkable passage, he explains how the Trinity, paradoxically inseparable from the energies and present in them,¹⁹³ becomes indwelling in the deified man:

Let us not, then, turn aside incredulous before the superabundance of these blessings; but let us have faith in Him, who has participated in our nature and granted it in return the glory of His own nature, and let us seek how to acquire this glory and see it. How? By keeping the divine commandments. For the Lord has promised to manifest Himself to the man who keeps them, a manifestation He calls His own indwelling and that of the Father, saying, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My father will love him, and We will come to him and will make our abode with him” (John 14:23), and “I will manifest Myself to him” (John 14:21).¹⁹⁴

For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the path to God is bound up with the assimilation of the divine qualities or “character traits” (*akhlāq*), as indicated by the divine names. He approves of a saying often attributed to the Prophet, “Assume the character traits of God,” adding, “that is Sufism.”¹⁹⁵ In a sense, man already possess the traits, since he was created upon the divine form: “The fact is that all of the divine character traits are found in man’s innate disposition.”¹⁹⁶ The task imposed by the Trust is to bring the traits into manifestation, fullness and harmony. Given the multiplicity of qualities, assuming them in an appropriate balance is not without difficulties: “Without doubt, putting noble character traits into practice is difficult, since doing so...involves the meeting of opposites.”¹⁹⁷ The principle by which the proper harmony may be achieved is the divine Law, as the Shaykh explains: “In your every motion in respect to every existent thing, look at the ruling of the Law.... Then in all of that you will be secure and honored with God, and you will possess a divine light.”¹⁹⁸

As the spiritual traveler proceeds on the path back to God, he may be granted a tasting (*dhawq*), unveiling (*kashf*) or opening (*fath*), through which God illuminates the heart and enables him to perceive something of the unseen world. Although such a perception most typically is of a visionary form,¹⁹⁹ the perception of spiritual reality as light is a fundamental mode of unveiling. The association of light with both God and existence runs through the Islamic tradition; According to the famous “Light Verse” of the Qur’ān, “God is the light of the heavens and the

earth...” (Qur’ān 24:35), while the Prophet said of God, “He is a light.”²⁰⁰ For Ibn al-‘Arabī, light is associated with *wujūd* itself: “God says, ‘And to whomsoever God assigns no light, no light has he’ (Qur’ān 24:40). The light ‘assigned’ to the possible thing is nothing other than the *wujūd* of the Real.”²⁰¹ In the two passages below, the Shaykh describes the unveiling of light in the heart, both as enabling the perception of visionary forms, and as perception of light itself:

But when man applies himself to the mirror of his heart and polishes it with invocation [*dhikr*] and the recitation of the Qur’ān, he thereby gains some light. And God possesses a light called the “light of existence” which is deployed over all existent things. When these two lights come together, unseen things are unveiled as they are in themselves and as they occur in existence.²⁰²

If the seeker desires divine loci of witnessing and lordly sciences, he should multiply his nightly vigils and continually multiply within them his concentration (*jam‘iyya*). If scattered lights should appear to him such that between each light darkness is interspersed, and if those lights have no subsistence but disappear quickly, this is one of the first marks of acceptance and opening. Those noble lights will never cease becoming manifest to him through his acts of spiritual struggle (*mujāhada*) and his striving until a greatest light is unveiled for him. Then the obstructions which prevent people from reaching these knowledges will be removed and mysteries of which he had nothing in himself and by which he was not described will be unveiled for him their stations.²⁰³

The end of the spiritual path is to become a full locus of disclosure for the totality of the divine qualities, as represented in the all-comprehensive name “Allah.” The perfected human being, or “perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is the one who has fully realized the Trust, and the only one who may truly be called a vicegerent of God. As Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks:

Man possesses an eminence over everything in the heaven and earth. He is God’s sought-after goal among the existent things, since it is he whom God has taken as a locus of self-disclosure. I mean by “man” perfect man, since he is perfect only through God’s form.²⁰⁴

The perfect man is the “Possessor of the Two Eyes” (*dhu’l-‘aynayn*).²⁰⁵ Through the one, he sees God as incomparable: “He sees Him neither in any thing nor in himself.”²⁰⁶ Through the other, he sees Him as similar: “He sees His Being permeating all things.”²⁰⁷ In either case, he witnesses nothing but God.

In the station of all-comprehensiveness, of the perfect disclosure and equilibrium of the totality of divine qualities, no particular attributes delimit the perfect man. Rather, he stands in the station of “no station” (*lā maqām*): “The highest of all human beings are those who have no station.”²⁰⁸ The Shaykh explains further:

The most all-inclusive specification is that a person not be delimited by a station whereby he is distinguished. So the Muhammadan [i.e. the possessor of no station] is only distinguished by the fact that he has no station specifically. His station is that of no station.²⁰⁹

Such a station is not one of stasis, but rather involves a dynamic equilibrium characterized by constant fluctuation at each instant. "...In every breath, in every moment, and in every state he takes the form which is required by that breath, moment and state."²¹⁰ Similarly, even in this station, there is no end to unveiling or self-disclosure, and thus no end to knowledge of God: "...in every state the knower says, 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge!' (Qur'³ān 20:114)."²¹¹

Perfect man, through being a perfected locus of divine self-disclosure, embraces, in his own qualities, perfect servanthood, perfect poverty and even, paradoxically, perfect nonexistence. "There can be no sheer servanthood, uncontaminated by any lordship whatsoever, except in perfect man alone."²¹² "The returners to God are "destitute" of everything other than God."²¹³ "The final end and ultimate return of the gnostics (*ʿarīfūn*) – though their entities remain immutably fixed – is that the Real is identical with them, while they do not exist."²¹⁴ While they never embrace God in His Essence, which remains transcendent for every aspect of the created order, their situation becomes that described by the well-known *ḥadīth qudsī*:

My servant draws near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.²¹⁵

Conclusion

The shoal on which so much polemical furor and ecumenical fervor has run aground is the assumption that the truth or validity of another faith rests largely on its degree of identity with one's own. While attractive for obvious reasons, it nevertheless places limits upon God, who is presumed to have revealed Himself once or at least best in one's own faith. But God is not exhausted by a given revelatory disclosure, nor does He disclose Himself in the same way twice.²¹⁶ In respect of God's distinct revelatory disclosures, we cannot expect to overcome uniqueness and difference, precisely because the disclosures revealed by God are distinct. Only in respect of their Source, God, who is one and singular, can such difference in His revelatory disclosures be overcome. As we cannot stand at such a level, what we may attempt instead is to grasp, through the offered parallels that lie at the heart of His multiple disclosures, a vision of their unique underlying Source.

When, in his old age, Palamas was captured by the Turks during a sea voyage and made to stay nearly a year in Asia Minor, the captive archbishop engaged in amicable theological debates with, among others, the son of the Emir. One hope that he harbored during these debates was that, "a day will soon come when we will be able to understand each other."²¹⁷ Let us hope that that day, so long overdue, may dawn for us all.

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