

# Gregory Palamas at the Council of Blachernae, 1351

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THE STORY of the last centuries of Byzantium is one of shrinking frontiers and inevitable disintegration, graphically illustrated by the disasters of Manzikert (1071) and Myriocephalon (1176). The final disaster of 1453 only marks the end of a story the outcome of which had long been determined. Curiously enough, however, these years of increasing decay, when Byzantium proved “a marvel of tenacity,”<sup>1</sup> were also years of extraordinary vitality in such areas as Byzantine theology and art. The profound puzzle of cultural energy amidst political inertia and exhaustion is best illustrated by hesychasm—a movement long organic to Byzantine spirituality, but which first gained momentum with its first eminent exponent, Gregory Palamas, theologian and monk of Mount Athos, and subsequent archbishop of Thessalonica.

Happily, confusion and obscurity no longer shroud the personality and achievement of Gregory Palamas. Recent research has shown that Palamite theology—the *cause célèbre* that shook the fabric of Byzantine society in the 1340s—constitutes an organic continuation of the strong biblical and patristic tradition of the Byzantine Church. The theology of Palamas is in no way an innovative or heretical deviation from orthodoxy (and therefore of marginal importance as some have thought).<sup>2</sup> No one has contributed more to making Palamas accessible

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Ostrogorsky in *CMedH*<sup>2</sup> IV.1 (Oxford 1968) 367; J. M. Hussey, “Gibbon Rewritten: Recent Trends in Byzantine Studies,” in *Rediscovering Eastern Christendom*, ed. A. H. Armstrong and E. J. B. Fry (London 1963) 100: “It does seem that continuity of tradition and new life are to be found in the art, music, spirituality, literature and learning of the period after the capture of Constantinople and the unfortunate partial dismemberment of the Byzantine empire in 1204.”

<sup>2</sup> This, in the main, is the view of Roman Catholic scholarship on the subject. See M. Jugie, “Palamas, Grégoire,” in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* XI.2 (1932) cols.1735–76, and P. S. Guichardan, *Le problème de la simplicité divine en Orient et en Occident aux XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles: Grégoire Palamas, Duns Scot, Georges Scholarios* (Lyons 1933). The latter examines the problem from the view of Thomist philosophy. See the review of this work by V. Grumel,

to western readers—by showing the true meaning and traditional character of Palamas' formulation—than Fr Jean Meyendorff.<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical and theological principles of hesychast doctrine were actually the core of the controversy between Palamas and his opponents, Barlaam and Akindynos. At all events, the more immediate question of the ascetical practices of the monks of Athos was soon relegated to the background. The theological doctrine was hammered out by Palamas in a variety of works, and after considerable debate and controversy was declared orthodox by the Councils of 1341 and 1351. The latter, held in the Palace of Blachernae, placed the Byzantine Church's seal of approval on Palamas' doctrine and marks the end of the controversy. The Western Church has never accepted these two Councils, nor for that matter the theology of Palamas.<sup>4</sup>

The Council of Blachernae, 1351, which met in a room of the celebrated *triclinium*, was presided over by the "sovereign and holy emperor" John Cantacuzenus and was attended by the patriarch Callistus, the entire senate, some twenty-five metropolitans, seven

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*EchO* 38 (1935) 84–96. The attitudes of western scholars have actually been moulded long before, with the writings of the eminent XVII-century Jesuit scholar Denis Petau, for whom *cf.* the discussion in V. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, transl. A. Moorhouse (London 1963) 17f.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas* (Paris 1959), with a splendid bibliography; see also the same author's shorter study, *St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe* (Paris 1959). The contribution of Papamichael, Ostrogorsky, Krivosheine, Lossky and Christou should not be overlooked. See especially Basil Krivosheine, *The Ascetic and Theological Teaching of Gregory Palamas* (London 1954), repr. from *Eastern Churches Quarterly* no.4 (1938). This undeniably constitutes one of the most cogent expositions of the subject. See also G. C. Papamichael, *Ὁ ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς* (Petersburg/Alexandria 1911); Hans-Georg Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich* (Munich 1959) 322f, 712f. Consult also the articles of P. K. Christou, *Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ ἠθικὴ ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια* IV (1964) cols.775–94, and H. Schader, "Das Glaubensbekenntnis des Gregor Palamas," *Evangelische Theologie* 16, pt.7 (1956) 319–29. This progress is in many ways astonishing and is a far cry from the position taken by Henri Grégoire some years ago. This eminent Byzantinist considered Palamism a deviation and aberration of Byzantine Christianity: *cf.* his essay "The Byzantine Church" in *Byzantium*, ed. N. Baynes (Oxford 1953) 115–16.

<sup>4</sup> The historian should note that this official approval had for Byzantium both a cultural and theological importance, inasmuch as it was, in the main, a victory for the conservative Greek tradition that opposed both western culture and the Roman Church. 1351 marked a change in attitude from the strong Latin influence that had obtained in Byzantium in the preceding two centuries. See G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1968) 522f. For details on the Council of 1351, *cf.* Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 366.

bishops and several proxies.<sup>5</sup> It included of course the anti-Palamite faction, which was permitted to give its views, but which was unable to procure from the synod the condemnation of Palamas.

In the second session of the Council, Palamas maintained that much of his polemical writing in defense of the hesychast position was not necessarily a model of theological nicety and thoroughness of expression. What was of greater moment—he argued—was the truth embodied in his work, rather than the theological formulations. Be this as it may, he did have a confession of faith, which because of its nature possessed exactitude and precision in expression.<sup>6</sup> The emperor then requested Palamas to read this confession to the assembly, at which point many of Palamas' opponents left the room. Those who remained, however, expressed their approval of the confession, and indeed hoped that it would be with such a confession that the good archbishop would appear on the last day before the judgement seat of Christ;<sup>7</sup> the second session ended on this note.

It is this little known *Confession* made by Palamas that is here presented in English translation for the first time.<sup>8</sup> It is surprising that this *ὁμολογία* is not better known, since according to Palamas' own testimony it possesses a precision rarely found in his other works. That the *Confession* does indeed give the essentials of his system, which here receives its most incisive expression, there is no doubt. Palamas had written this statement several years before, probably in prison in the years 1343–1344.<sup>9</sup> And we may reasonably assume with Meyendorff that it was first read publicly by Palamas at his episcopal consecration, in 1347.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Encomium Philotheo*, PG 151, col.621D.

<sup>6</sup> *Tomus Synodicus*, PG 151, col.723B: ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ὁμολογίας ἀκρίβεια διὰ πάντων τηρεῖται καὶ ζητεῖται. See also Papamichael, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 136.

<sup>7</sup> PG 151, col.723c.

<sup>8</sup> I know of no other translation from the Greek except a German attempt in *Wort und Mystereium* (Witten 1958) 220–24 (a collection of Orthodox theological works in German translation). The original, however, is to be found in Ms Paris. Gr. 1351A, fol.350 (*cf.* Meyendorff, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.3] 365), and in the following editions: I. Karmiris, ed., *Τὰ δογματικὰ καὶ συμβολικὰ μνημεῖα τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας* I (Athens 1952) 343–46. My translation is from this edition, a far more competent work than the older edition by Fr F. Combefis, *Bibliothecae graecorum patrum auctarium novissimum* II (Paris 1672) 172–76, which is reproduced in PG 151, cols.763–68. There is also the edition in Dositheus of Jerusalem, *Τόμος ἀγάπης* (Jassy 1698) 85–88.

<sup>9</sup> So Christou, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) col.785, and Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 365.

<sup>10</sup> Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 366.

Confessions—formal statements of doctrines made by an individual or individuals—are as old as Christianity itself.<sup>11</sup> It is generally agreed that the difference between a ‘confession’ and a ‘creed’ is that a creed is almost always briefer and less comprehensive than the long and more systematic exposition of faith of a confession.<sup>12</sup> Such certainly is the case with the solemn *Confession* made by Palamas in 1351. Interestingly enough, however, the exposition follows in outline the celebrated Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed and in fact ends in almost identical fashion with the words, “we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting of the world to come.”

Palamas commences with a discussion of the three Persons of the Trinity and notes the characteristics of each hypostasis in some detail. In his discussion of the Holy Spirit no mention is made of the Latin doctrine of procession, but the orthodox view is clearly enunciated—“he is sent not only from the Son, but from the Father and through the Son, and is manifested through himself.”

He then proceeds to describe how God manifests himself in the world, and here Palamas launches into a discussion of his celebrated teaching concerning the essence (*οὐσία*) and energies (*ἐνέργειαι*) of God. He is careful to note with considerable precision the fundamental point of his doctrine, namely, the incommunicability of the divine substance: God is accessible only by his non-hypostatic, non-autonomous energies—his action and self-revelation to the world. The simplicity of God—a crucial issue in the entire hesychast debate—in no way suffers as a result of these distinctions.

A brief discussion follows on the veneration of images, the holy cross, relics of the saints, and the nature and genesis of evil. The place of tradition in the Church is acknowledged and of the sacraments, especially of the Holy Eucharist.

He next enumerates the seven ecumenical Councils which he “accepts and receives with joy” and points out the errors condemned in each of these assemblies. Moreover, he accepts the local council of 1341, which condemned his opponents Barlaam and Akindynos inasmuch as they impiously taught that the energies of God are created

<sup>11</sup> Cf. I Tim. 6.13; II Cor. 9.13.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Y. Congar, “Confession,” in *Catholicisme* II (1949) cols.1507–08, and the article by W. A. Curtis in J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* III (1928) 830–901.

and therefore exist apart from God. He concludes with his belief in the general resurrection and in the life to come.

Here follows a complete translation of the *Confession*.

THE ORTHODOX CONFESSION OF FAITH SET FORTH BY THE  
MOST REVEREND METROPOLITAN OF THESSALONICA,  
LORD GREGORY PALAMAS<sup>13</sup>

THERE IS ONE GOD before all things, and over all, and in all, and above all,<sup>14</sup> in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is worshipped and believed by us: a Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, united without confusion and divided without separation;<sup>15</sup> the same Unity is also the omnipotent Trinity. The Father is without beginning not only because he is eternal but because, in addition, he is in every manner uncaused; he alone is the author, foundation and source of the Godhead contemplated in the Son and the Holy Spirit; he alone is the initial author of things—not only the Creator, but the unique Father of the one Son, and Producer<sup>16</sup> of the one Holy Spirit; being eternal, and being eternally Father, and being eternally unique Father and Producer. He is greater than the Son and the Spirit<sup>17</sup> (in the sense that he is the causative principle), but in all other things he is identical with them and equal.

He has one Son, who is on the one hand without beginning since he is eternal, yet on the other is not without beginning since he has the Father as beginning, foundation and source; from whom alone he came forth before all ages—incorporeally, without change, impassibly, by generation—suffering no division, being God from God. Accordingly, he is not different since he is God, yet he is different since

<sup>13</sup> The more complete title of Ms Paris. Gr. 1351A, fol.350, is as follows: “The confession of faith of the Metropolitan of Thessalonica, Gregory Palamas, read before the divine and holy council, so that it could be heard clearly by all, and confirmed and venerated by all as being on all points most orthodox.” Cf. Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 365.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Eph. 4.6.

<sup>15</sup> See the remarkably similar phraseology of the *Mystagogia* by Maximus the Confessor, S. Massimo Confessore, *La Mystagogia ed altri scritti* ed. R. Cantarella (Florence 1931) 188: μονάδα ἐν τριάδι καὶ τριάδα ἐν μονάδι . . . ἀσύγχυτόν τε καὶ ἀσυγχύτως τὴν ἔνωσιν ἔχουσαν καὶ τὴν διάκρισιν ἀδιαίρετόν τε καὶ ἀμέριστον.

<sup>16</sup> *προβολεύς*, ‘producer’, ‘originator’. On the word cf. G. W. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1965) fasc.4 p.1140. Greg.Naz. speaks of the Father as *προβολεύς* and of the Spirit as *πρόβλημα*. See his *Oratio* 29 in PG 36, col.76b.

<sup>17</sup> John 14.28.

he is Son; he is eternal, is eternally Son and unique Son, and is eternally with God while remaining distinct; since his cause and beginning is the Father, he is not the author and beginning of the Godhead intelligible in the Trinity, but he is the author and beginning of all created things because through him all things were made. Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but for all eternity made himself of no reputation, and took upon him our form,<sup>18</sup> and was conceived and born of the ever-Virgin Mary with the good will of the Father and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, according to natural law, being equally God and man; and being truly incarnate he became like us in all things except sin. He remained true God (something that was certain), uniting without confusion and immutably the two natures and wills and operations; and he remained, even after the incarnation, one Son in one hypostasis, performing all the divine acts as God and all the human as man, and subjecting himself innocently to the human passions.<sup>19</sup> And being impassible and immortal he remained God, yet he willingly suffered in the flesh as man. And he was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day arose and appeared to his disciples after the Resurrection; and having sent the power from on high,<sup>20</sup> he instructed [them] to teach all nations, to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, to observe and teach all that he commanded.<sup>21</sup> He was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of the Father,<sup>22</sup> and he made our human body equal in honor and co-reigning, god-like as it were; and with this body, he shall again return with glory to judge the living and the dead, and render unto each according to his works.

And once he had ascended to the Father he sent the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, upon his holy disciples and Apostles. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is together with the Father and the Son without beginning since he is eternal, yet on the other he is not without beginning since he, too—by way of procession, not by way of

<sup>18</sup> *Phil.* 2.6.

<sup>19</sup> This is a succinct statement and summation of the dogmatic definition of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 and of the Council of Constantinople of 680. Cf. Karmiris, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) I.163f, 185f. On Chalcedon cf. especially R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* (London 1961) 207f.

<sup>20</sup> *Luke* 24.49.

<sup>21</sup> *Matt.* 28.19f.

<sup>22</sup> *Mark.* 16.19.

generation—has the Father as foundation, source and cause. He also [like the Son] came forth from the Father before all ages, without change, impassibly, not by generation but by procession; he is inseparable from the Father and the Son since he proceeds from the Father and reposes in the Son; he possesses union without losing his identity and division without involving separation. He too is God from God; he is not different since he is God, yet he is different since he is the Comforter;<sup>23</sup> as Spirit he possesses hypostatic existence, proceeds from the Father and is sent—that is, manifested—through the Son;<sup>24</sup> he too is the cause of all created things since it is in him that they are perfected. He is identical and equal with the Father and the Son with the exception of unbegottenness and generation. He was sent, that is, made known, from the Son to his own disciples: By what other means—he who is inseparable from the Son—could he have been sent? By what other means could he—who is everywhere—come to me? Wherefore, he is sent not only from the Son, but from the Father, and through the Son, and is manifested through himself.

The mission, that is the manifestation, is a common task. He is not made known according to essence—for no one ever saw or revealed God's nature—but according to grace, power, operation,<sup>25</sup> which is common to the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. The distinguishing feature of each is his hypostasis and whatever refers to it. They not only possess mutually the superessential essence which is entirely anonymous, unrevealed and incommunicable (for it is above every name, manifestation and participation), but the grace, the power, the operation, the brightness, the kingdom, the incorruption, and to put it simply, all the means by which God communicates, and by which, according to grace, he is united with the holy angels and men; without being deprived of his simplicity either as a result of the divisibility and distinction of the hypostases or as a result of the divisibility and multiplicity of the powers and operations. Therefore, for us, there is one omnipotent God in one Godhead. For a composition can never be created from perfect hypostases or from a potentiality, which is such

<sup>23</sup> *John* 14.16.

<sup>24</sup> *John* 15.26.

<sup>25</sup> ἀλλὰ μετὰ τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν.

because it possesses a power or powers; because of this, it can never be said that potentiality is properly composite.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, we venerate relatively (referring this veneration to the original) the holy image of the representation of the Son of God, who was incarnate for us. Similarly, we venerate the honorable wood of the cross and all the symbols of his passion as being truly the divine trophies against the common enemy of our race; we venerate the saving image [τύπον] of the venerable cross, the holy churches and locations, the sacred utensils and the words divinely handed down, inasmuch as God dwells in them. We also venerate the images of all the saints in recognition of our love for them and for God, whom they truly loved and worshipped; in this act of veneration we direct our thoughts to the representations of the images. We venerate the very relics of the saints since the sanctifying grace does not vanish from their most holy bones, just as the Godhead was not divided from the Lord's body during the three-day death.

We do not acknowledge evil according to essence, nor is its origin other than the deviation of reason, that is, the misuse of our God-given free will. We respect all ecclesiastical traditions, written and unwritten, and above all the most mystical and all-holy rite and communion and gathering [σύναξις], by which the other rites are perfected; during which—in remembrance of him who emptied himself without being emptied<sup>27</sup> and who was incarnate and suffered for us—the most divine [gifts] are sacrificed and deified according to his holy injunction and personal act; and the bread and cup become that life-giving body and blood, and its ineffably transformed substance and communion is granted to those who approach with purity. We cast out and place under excommunication everyone who does not confess and believe that the Holy Spirit prophesied through the prophets, that the Lord having appeared to us in the flesh spoke divine words, that the Apostles preached having been sent by him, that our Fathers and their successors taught us; and, conversely, everyone who either began his own heresy or followed to the end a heresy begun in evil by others.

We accept and receive with joy the holy ecumenical councils: the

<sup>26</sup> οὔτε γὰρ ἐξ ὑποστάσεων τελείων γένοιτ' ἂν ποτε σύνθεσις, οὔτε τὸ δυνάμενον, ὅτι δύναμιν ἡ δυνάμεις ἔχει, δι' αὐτὸ τὸ δύνασθαι σύνθετον ἀληθῶς ποτε λεχθείη ἂν.

<sup>27</sup> Phil. 2.6.

Council of the 318 God-inspired fathers meeting in Nicaea against the rebellious Arius, who impiously reduced the Son of God to a creature and separated the Godhead—worshipped in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—into created and uncreated; the Council subsequent to this of the 150 holy fathers, meeting in Constantinople against Macedonius of Constantinople, who impiously reduced the Holy Spirit into a creature and separated no less impiously the one Godhead into created and uncreated; the Council of the 200 fathers meeting in Ephesus against Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, who rejected the hypostatic union in Christ, of his divinity and humanity, and who in no way would consent to call the Virgin who truly bore God ‘Theotokos’; and the fourth Council of the 630 fathers meeting in Chalcedon against Eutyches and Dioscorus, who erroneously taught as doctrine one nature in Christ; and the Council following, of the 165 fathers meeting in Constantinople against Theodorus and Diodorus, who held identical views with Nestorius, and recommended the latter’s teaching through their writings; [this Council also met] against Origen, Didymus and a certain Evagrius (of an older generation), who endeavored to introduce certain mythical doctrines into the Church of God; and the Council following of the 170 fathers meeting in the same city against Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, who presided in Constantinople, and who rejected the two energies and two wills appropriate to the two natures of Christ; and the Council of the 367 fathers meeting once more in Nicaea against the Iconoclasts.

Moreover, we receive with joy the holy councils that have assembled through God’s grace at different times and places for the firm establishment of piety and evangelical life; among which are those held in this great city in the celebrated Church of the Holy Wisdom of God, against Barlaam the Calabrian, and the man following him, Akindynus, who held the same views and with cunning hastened to vindicate him.<sup>28</sup> These two teach that the grace common to the Father, Son and Spirit—the light of the age to come, in which the righteous will shine as the sun, just as Christ intimated when he shone on the

<sup>28</sup> Palamas is here referring to the Council of 1341 and that of 1351 held in Constantinople. These Councils, although not ecumenical, possess doctrinal authority; their decisions are as valid as those of the Seven Ecumenical Councils (mentioned in the preceding paragraph by Palamas), since they were ultimately accepted by the entire eastern Church. Cf. T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore 1968) 210f, and Sir Steven Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (Cambridge 1968) 23.

mountain,—and simply every power and operation of the Three Persons of the Godhead,<sup>29</sup> and everything that differs from the divine nature in any way whatever, is created; and they too impiously separate the one Godhead into created and uncreated. And they label as atheists and polytheists (just as Jews, Sabellians and Arians believe of us), those who piously believe that the most sacred light is uncreated and every power and operation is divine—since nothing which issues naturally from God is created.<sup>30</sup> But we properly cast out both the latter and the former as atheists and polytheists and totally excommunicate them from the company of the faithful, as the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ did through the Synodal Tome and the Hagioretic Tome.<sup>31</sup> We believe in one omnipotent Godhead in three hypostases, whose unity and simplicity are in no way lost on account of either the powers or the hypostases. Moreover, we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting of the world to come. AMEN.

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*September, 1969*

<sup>29</sup> τῆς τρισυποστάτου θεότητος.

<sup>30</sup> ὡς μηδενὸς ὄντος προσφάτου τῶν τῷ Θεῷ προσόντων φυσικῶς.

<sup>31</sup> The *Hagioretic Tome*, PG 150, cols. 1225–36, is extremely important for the entire controversy. It was written by Palamas in 1339, and although no mention is made of Barlaam, his ideas are definitely condemned. The *Synodal Tome*, PG 151, cols. 717–64, is the document that incorporates all the decisions of the Council of 1351 and was written by Philotheus, Metropolitan of Heraclea; it at once confirms the doctrine of Palamas and excommunicates all those who do not accept it. Cf. Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) 74f. 148f.