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## 'Poverty of Particularity:' Reconciling Divine Transcendence and Imminence Using Gregory Palamas' Essence-Energies Distinction

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'Poverty of Particularity:'  
Reconciling Divine Transcendence and Imminence Using Gregory Palamas' Essence-Energies  
Distinction

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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by

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December 9, 2019

'POVERTY OF PARTICULARITY:  
RECONCILING DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMINENCE USING GREGORY  
PALAMAS' ESSENCE-ENERGIES DISTINCTION

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December 9, 2019

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“I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.”  
T. S. Elliot, “The Waste Land”

## **I. Introduction**

In this essay, I will argue that God, in order to truly be God, must be both entirely transcendent of all other than His own self and imminent in respect to creation in a way that is not contradictory to this transcendence. I will also argue that divine transcendence and imminence are plausibly reconcilable with each other through the fourteenth-century theologian Gregory Palamas’ distinction between the essence of God and the energies of God. I will then respond to a number of objections to this view. I write this not only for the benefit of theists seeking to understand God more and speak about Him in a more accurate manner, but also for anyone attempting to better grasp the idea of God in a way that is consistent with what is often said of Him and to better speak of God, who is an entity that, existent or not, is spoken about very often, needless to say. I also write to shed light on the work of Gregory Palamas, whose reputation in academia is disproportionately small relative to His historical significance.

### **I.1: Background and Intention of This Essay**

Palamas wrote in response to certain teachings of others that he considered not only to be false, but also to be a threat to theology and the use of reason to inquire about God as a whole. Both Palamas and contemporaries of his that he sought to refute in his theological writings were inheritors of an intellectual, theistic tradition in Eastern Christianity that was influenced by the Neoplatonism of antiquity and given focus by early Christian writers, especially Pseudo-

Dionysius the Aeropagite, whom I will accordingly reference often throughout this essay.<sup>1</sup> This tradition contrasts with that of the West at the time, which had come to stress the knowability of God and conceptual formulations of God, particularly under the influence of the famous Thomas Aquinas, such that divine transcendence was arguably compromised. Palamas and his forerunners and inheritors fought against this compromise, as will be evident in this essay.<sup>2</sup> However, Gregory Palamas is best remembered for his writings against Barlaam, an Eastern writer of his own generation who, according to Palamas, sought to stress divine transcendence so much that our ability to know God and make meaningful statements about Him was jeopardized.<sup>3</sup> This was not only a threat to the practice of theology, but it was also a threat to the defensibility of Church doctrine, since it removed God so fully from being an object of human inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Palamas alleged that Barlaam, by sealing off doctrine regarding God in a realm of irrationality, doomed doctrine to a formal conservatism that lacked intellectual rigor and the opportunity for growth.<sup>5</sup> This essay, by extension, is a defense of the idea that religious teaching should be subject to the same sort of rational scrutiny as other kind of teachings, an idea that Palamas held.

Both Barlaam and Palamas agreed, in keeping with their tradition, that God was totally transcendent of creation, which included for them all that is not God, but Palamas stood against Barlaam in asserting a divine imminence that was nevertheless quite different than that which was being promoted in the West at the time, as the East had not before been in need of such a

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<sup>1</sup> Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. London: J. Clarke, 1957., 203, Terezis, Christos, and Lydia Petridou. "The Theory of Union-Distinction as a Paradigm of Gregory Palamas' Methodology." *SCHOLE* 11(1) (2017): 117-132., 121.

<sup>2</sup> Tanase, Nichifor. "Crucifixion of the Logic: Palamite Theology of the Uncreated Divine Energies as a Fundament of an Ontological Epistemology." *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 6(4) (2015): 69-106., 83. By the West, I here mean Western Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> Meyendorff, John. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. London: Faith Press, 1964., 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

defense.<sup>6</sup> To do this, he formulated a model of God using his most famous brainchild, the distinction between the essence of God and the energies of God. I will defend here this distinction as plausible as a model of God, for that is ultimately what it is, and as a way to reconcile divine imminence and divine transcendence, the latter of which I will argue is best understood in the strong manner that Palamas and those in his tradition affirm. First, in this section, I will clarify the definition of God and some relevant terms used in Palamas' Eastern tradition and as I will use them in this paper specifically. In Section II, I will defend my strong view of total divine transcendence and the unknowability of God that it entails, and in Section III, I will defend the need for divine imminence, something that is apparently at odds with total divine transcendence. In Section IV, I will introduce the essence-energies distinction as a solution to this tension, describe it, and defend its plausibility and usefulness. Unlike Palamas, I will not argue that the distinction must be the case, but rather that it is one successful way, perhaps the best available, in building a model of God that incorporates all that it needs to. I do not mean this merely to be a representation of the doctrine of a Church, but in true Palamite fashion, I will defend it as truly useful and deserving of consideration in theistic philosophy as a field. In section V, I will respond to objections to the distinction's plausibility and usefulness.

## **I.2: Definition of God and Other Terms**

The purpose of this section is not to give universal definitions for these terms, especially since most of them are difficult to define in the sense that they lack a single, dictionary-like definition. My goals in providing definitions are to define terms in a way consistent with and descriptive of the way that Palamas, Palamas scholars, and writers in Palamas' tradition use them and to define them as I will use them throughout this essay.

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<sup>6</sup> Meyendorff, John. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974., 119, Torrance, Alexis. "Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers." *Vigiliae Christianae* 63(1) (2009): 47-70., 49.

1. God: God is an entity such that no greater entity can be conceived. He is the greatest possible entity,<sup>7</sup> possessing ultimate power, knowledge, and goodness, unchanging, simple, immortal, and beyond time. If there is creation, such as the universe, God is its creator, and God is prior to all other than Himself. In this essay, I will not compromise commonly and dearly-held attributes of God needlessly; if I do, then it is for the purpose of establishing a model of God in which the attribute in question is inconsistent. This is to say that I do not intend to throw the baby out with the bathwater; the God of this essay should not be so radically different than the God of normal discourse that Palamas' model becomes too costly for most readers.

2. Existence, being, and reality: These are three states that something can inhabit in terms of its ontology. Reality, synonymous with actuality, is the state of being actualized or realized, in contrast with the state of being a potentiality. Anything that can be called real is in this state. Everyone who is currently alive is real, as is every building that has been built, and so forth. Potentialities include people who could be born, but have not been, buildings that could be built yet have not, and so forth in the same manner. Things become real by moving from potentiality to actuality, in the tradition of Aristotle, whose influence on Palamas and his contemporaries is universal and quite strong.<sup>8</sup> Both potentialities and actualities have being. All potential things are not real and vice versa, but it is true of all potentialities and all actualities that they have being. In other words, potentialities and actualities are united in that both possess being. All that has being has existence, but not all that has existence necessarily has being. God, being prior to all other than Himself, is said by Pseudo-Dionysius and his successors to transcend being. I will discuss this in more depth in Section II. There I will argue, drawing from a long tradition, that since God, being God, does not depend upon anything beyond Himself, He must not depend

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<sup>7</sup> Anselm of Canterbury. "Proslogion." In *The Major Works*, 82-104. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998., 87.

<sup>8</sup> Terezis, Christos, and Lydia Petridou. "The Theory of Union-Distinction as a Paradigm of Gregory Palamas' Methodology." *SCHOLE* 11(1) (2017): 117-132., 121.

upon and indeed must be prior to being and that God's omnipotence implies the ability to transcend being. I use the term 'existence' to denote the broadest and most primeval state. Being is added to things and is distinct from their essences, as is reality.<sup>9</sup> Existence, though not part of an essence, is not added to an essence; an essence exists by virtue of being an essence. Anything that is anything has existence.<sup>10</sup> Since being is not part of an essence; it is added to it, therefore, it cannot ground God, since God is the creator of that which is not Himself. Furthermore, as I will argue for later, were being to ground God, then it would rival God in greatness and fundamentality. For such reasons, we must conclude that something can exist beyond being, and I use the term existence to encompass both this way of existing and being, which in turn includes potentiality and actuality.<sup>11</sup> Corresponding to each state described above, I have a term that denotes an inhabitant of it. That which inhabits existence is an entity. An entity is any distinct piece of that which exists. I speak of God as an entity because I will argue that He transcends being and does not need a ground or foundation that is added to Him. A being is anything that inhabits or possesses being, whether it is a potentiality or an actuality. A real thing is something that inhabits reality specifically.

4. Essence: an essence is what makes something what it is. In humans, it is the soul, and it is something akin to a soul in animals and inanimate objects as well, allowing them to persist across time and change. The usage of the word essence as used by Palamas and others of his age is derived largely from Aristotle's writings on essences, which are sometimes also called

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<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica, Volume I*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952., 16.

<sup>10</sup> Hart, David Bentley. *The Hidden and the Manifest*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017., 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes holds a view like this one, in which potentialities or possibilities are creatures of God, even if they never become actualized. The realms of reality and potentiality are both created utterly by God, and if God does not create a possibility, then it is not a possibility at all, but rather nothing. Less recently, Duns Scotus and Thomas Bradwardine expound similar views. Descartes also notes that God could have created possibilities other than the ones that he does, and that even necessary truths are creatures. (Cunning, David. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. s.v. "Descartes' Modal Metaphysics." ed. Edward N. Zalta.)

substances or natures, and are in Greek called ‘*ousia*.’ However, Aristotle’s definitions are multiple and contradictory at times, and Palamas’ usage of ‘essence’ also borrows from the Christian idea of the soul.<sup>12</sup> A complex essence is composed of multiple parts, and a simple essence is not; it is indivisible and not partitive. The simplicity of God’s essence, commonly held as an assumption by Medieval Christian theologians, makes appearances throughout discussions of Palamas’ work, and so it will do so in this essay as well. Essences are said to be the bearers of attributes, and are the most fundamental parts of objects upon which the others sit, although essences are themselves, in most cases, grounded in being or some other such ground. Consider the following discourse on essences, said to have been spoken between a Hellenic king in India and a Buddhist teacher, Nagasena:

“Pray, bhante [teacher], is the hair of the head Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is the hair of the body Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Are [any other parts of the body] Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is now, bhante, [bodily] form Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is sensation Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is perception Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Are the psychic constructions Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is consciousness Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Are, then, bhante, form, sensation, perception, the psychic constructions, and consciousness unitedly Nagasena?” “No, truly, your majesty.”  
 “Is it, then, bhante, something besides form, sensation, perception, the psychic constructions, and consciousness, which is Nagasena?”<sup>13</sup>

The tradition in which we are dealing would answer that this is the essence. Essences are considered, for the purposes of this essay, to be immaterial, as they were considered to be in the intellectual tradition that we are dealing with.

5. Energy: Energy, the word for which comes from the Greek ‘*energeia*,’ which in turn, according to Aristotle, comes from the word ‘*ergon*,’ meaning ‘deed’ or ‘act,’ can refer to the

<sup>12</sup> Palamas at one point denies that essences are formulae, and this is one of Aristotle’s definitions. (Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 174.)

<sup>13</sup> “The Question of King Milinda” (Milindapañha). Trans. T. W. Rhys Davids. Sacred Books of the East. Vol. 35. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.

activity of something or its power, the direct Greek word for which is ‘*dumanis*,’ to do so. An eye, therefore, has the *energeia* of seeing both in the sense that it sees in an exercise of this energy and in the sense that it has the ability to see.<sup>14</sup> In either sense, the energies are said to be possessed by their user and are not the same as products, as a table is to its carpenter. Rather, it would be said that through his energy of building, He builds a table. Thinking, willing, moving, speaking, and sensing are all energies that can be said to be possessed by most humans.

6. Transcendence: Transcendence is a ‘going beyond.’ Therefore, the simplest way of using the word is to denote beyond-ness, that is, being outside the boundaries of something. A good example of transcendence is that of a four-dimensional object transcending our three-dimensional sense-experiences. In the sense in which I will use it here, transcendence is to go beyond categories and therefore be incapable of exhaustive categorization.<sup>15</sup> Transcendence of this kind, which is the kind applicable to God, divine transcendence, involves no amount of possible categorization, since God is prior to categories. Specifically, when I refer to transcendence, I am referring to the priority, non-dependence, and freedom that God has in respect to categories and the knowledge held by creatures. Indeed, God is totally free and self-sufficient, and He is unknowable, the last of which is a result of the former. Transcendence therefore includes both ontological and epistemic elements, though both kinds are expressed in statements made about the bearer of transcendence. When I claim that God is totally transcendent, I am claiming that He has these qualities totally, not in some compromised or diminished way. Note that existence is neither a ground nor a category, since it is not separate from or added to essences.

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<sup>14</sup> Bradshaw, David. *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004., 1, 3, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, William. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. s.v. “Transcendentalism.” New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912.

7: Imminence: If transcendence is a going-beyond, imminence is a being-with. That which is imminent is knowable and conceptually able to be categorized exhaustively by that to which it is imminent. It is therefore the absence of transcendence. Divine imminence is the imminence of God relative to creation. It refers His knowability, and, for the purposes of this essay, will also refer to His presence in the universe. Most things that we encounter in life are imminent to us, such as humans, stones, buildings, animals, chemicals, elements, books, days, and places. Since imminence and transcendence are so related to each other, imminence also includes both ontological and epistemic elements.

8: Priority: Priority refers to the need for one entity to exist, perform a deed, or be in a certain state in order for another entity to do one of these as well. For example, a book upon which another book rests is prior in its sitting where it is to the book that rests upon it sitting where *it* is. Priority can be specifically causal, such as the priority of a billiard cue ball's motion to its target's motion, or it can be non-causal, such as the priority of the issuer of hunting and fishing licenses to a particular person hunting and fishing. Without the issuance of licenses, there would be no hunting or fishing, but the issuer is not causally related to the hunter hunting or the fisher fishing. He only allows these things to take place, and this sort of priority could be called priority of allowance. In dealing with God, this is an important distinction, since, as aforementioned, God is beyond time and unchanging yet still causally connected to many things. In short, if *y* depends upon *x* to be what *y* is, then *x* is prior to *y*.<sup>16</sup> Since God is the Creator of everything outside of Himself and there are no other such creators that could arise, God is prior to everything other than Himself. There is never mutual priority, although different actions or

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<sup>16</sup> Here we encounter the question of whether for a necessary truth, *x*, such as a tautology, *x* is prior to all non-*x*. I do not think that it is. For one, non-*x* includes other necessary truths, making an answer of 'yes' problematic. I also see no reason why a non-necessary non-*x* is dependent upon *x* in the case that it is apparently unrelated, such as my wearing a blue shirt's apparent non-relation to bachelors being unmarried men. Even if I am wrong here, though, the priority that I speak of, God's, would still apply, since God is the Creator of every real universe *and* necessary.

facets of one thing might be prior to those of another, which in turn might produce some action or attribute that is prior to a different action or facet in the first. For example, if I split wood that is stacked by another person, and I then use that stacked wood to build a fire, my building of the fire is posterior to someone else's deed that was itself posterior to a different deed of myself, but there is no mutual priority, since all three actions are different.

9: Apophasis and Catophasis: Catophasic theology includes statements about God that are positive, such as 'God is supremely good' or 'God is Love' and purports that they are literally true. Apophatic theology encompasses statements about God that are negative, such as 'God is without change' or 'God is ineffable,' or 'God has no body.' They are not amorphous or less concrete than catophasic theological statements; they are statements of denial, rather than affirmation. The Eastern tradition that we are dealing with favors apophasis, since it is said to be more accurate. I will speak more about this in Section II.

10: Omnipotence: Omnipotence is the possession of having truly infinite power. It is distinct from being all-powerful or all-mighty, because the latter could be true of something that has maximal, yet finite power, while the former can only be true of something that has unlimited power, which is infinite.

## **II. Divine Transcendence**

We have said that transcendence is a going-beyond and that the specific sort of transcendence that is relevant here is the going-beyond of categories. I claim in this section that this is true of God in a total sense, meaning that we cannot categorize God even partially.<sup>17</sup> This, I will argue, is because of his omnipotence and priority to all that is outside of Him, two things that are generally said of Him, and these two divine attributes entail total transcendence. We can

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<sup>17</sup> I do not consider existence a category, since it is not an attribute or quality. It is redundant as a predicate, since it is not separable (and not addable) from the subject. See my definition of existence in I.2.

therefore reliably say that God is completely free, powerful, and unknowable. In speaking of God's priority in this section, I mean specifically that everything other than God depends upon Him either directly or indirectly without God depending on these things. In Palamas' intellectual world, this was taken for granted, and I indeed find it hard to imagine denying from a theistic perspective. Maimonides, a prominent Medieval theologian and one loosely within this intellectual world, wrote of God's attributes,

“...that there is no similarity in any way whatsoever between Him and His creatures; that His [being] is not like the [being] of His creatures, His life not like that of any living being, His wisdom not like the wisdom of the wisest of men; and that the difference between Him and His creatures is not merely quantitative, but absolute as between two individuals of two different classes... ..for two things, of which the one is strong and the other weak, are not necessarily similar, belong to the same class, and can be included in one definition.”<sup>18</sup>

He separated God's attributes entirely from our ideas of them, relegating them to mystery that can inspire devotion greater than that spurred by definite, conceptual knowledge.

## **II.1: The Power of God**

According to Gregory Palamas and those of his tradition of thought, the affirmation of God's transcendence of concepts or even reason can be grounded in far stronger reasons than piety. For one, we must affirm that God is unbound by any and all boundaries or rules. To quote Palamas directly, “Dost thou make subject to necessities the Master of necessities, who can abolish them, when he wishes, and sometimes transforms them utterly?”<sup>19</sup> In other words, if God is the ground of that which is not Himself and the omnipotent ruler of creation, then how can He be bound to obey rules of logic, mathematics, or ethics? All of these systems were not only permitted by God, but also are subject to His total power and sovereignty. What could give such things power over the One who imparts their existence but the One? If this is the case, then

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, A. *The Teachings of Maimonides*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1968., 87.

<sup>19</sup> Lossky, 192.

they do not truly have power over Him, since He gives it to them. Could He not withdraw His decision to bring them into being or will to change them? If anything were to be able to force God into a certain path of action or limit His abilities, then God would not be the greatest conceivable being. This is because we can conceive of God being otherwise, namely, not forced or limited. The being whom we took to be God would not be God, and this force would be God, if even a radically different one than we expected. Now, this force, presuming that it binds God, can either be itself bound by another force or not. If it is, it would be an absurdity for the resulting chain of limiting forces to be infinite, and if it is finite, then God would be the binding yet unbound force, that is, the only infinitely powerful one at the top of the chain. If it is not bound by another force, then this first binding force, the one that acts directly upon the sham God, is God. In any of these scenarios, there must be a binding yet unbound force, and that force must be God, since anything that it binds would be inferior to it. God is therefore infinitely powerful, not simply maximally yet finitely powerful, for nothing is finite without reason. Rene Descartes held this belief, which he defended on a number of occasions, once writing,

“As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything that has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.”<sup>20</sup>

More recently, Harry Frankfurt held to this view, agreeing with Descartes that God is simply and wholly free because of his omnipotence to act and create however He chooses, regardless of logical rules, which he established to begin with.<sup>21</sup> This is none other than what I am claiming here.

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<sup>20</sup> Qtd. in Cunning, David. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. s.v. “Descartes’ Modal Metaphysics.” ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Whenever someone describes a God who is maximally but finitely powerful, we must ask what it is that prevents His power from being infinite. For many, it is the laws of logic and non-contradiction.<sup>22</sup> God for them can be thought of as being able to fulfill all possible paths of action except for those that are illogical. This at first glance seems not only ingenious but also convenient in that it keeps God in the realms of our analysis. However, if logic binds God, then God cannot control logic and its rules, but, to the contrary, logic would have power to limit God.<sup>23</sup> Some claim that illogical things are truly impossible such that not even God can do them, with the consequence that logic does not introduce a limit. I will respond to this objection in II.4. Now, it is fair to presume that if logic limits God, and if God cannot change logic, logic is more powerful than God, at least in one way. Nothing, however, can defeat God or be greater in power than Him, even by the teachings of those who profess maximal, finite power in God. Therefore, some theologians muddle their own concepts of divinity by introducing a power, finite or not, greater than that of God, who supposedly possesses a finite, maximal power.<sup>24</sup> We can conclude, then, that God transcends the rules and structures of logic and non-contradiction.

The effects of this are far more than semantic or devotional. God being transcendent of logic and the rules that it places on us who are less than God, we cannot speak of God as one who must follow logic's rules, since this would be equivalent to denying His transcendence of them. Suddenly, God is not just another agent or force in the universe that interacts with others. Rather, He is an entity that, while one, is beyond our most fundamental concrete ideas that we,

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<sup>22</sup> Aquinas and Maimonides are counted among these. See Aquinas, 143-150 and Cohen, 100.

<sup>23</sup> This appears to introduce a task that God could not fulfill, namely, to make Himself limited by logic. More broadly, this refers to the impossibility of God having less than infinite power. Note, however, that if we claim that God can make Himself limited by logic, then we would affirm that God can be less than omnipotent, but if we claim that He cannot fulfill this task, then we would affirm that there is something that is beyond God's power to bring about. If God is truly beyond logic, however, then He is surely beyond the need for his attributes, such as omnipotence, to constrain Him in such a way, since He is beyond the need for  $x$  to exclude  $\sim x$ .

<sup>24</sup> Such a teacher might counter with the fact that such a God could produce an infinite quantity of unique worlds, making His power infinite in some sense. Bear in mind, though, that an immortal monkey at a typewriter could produce unique strings of letters of infinite quantity, but its power would hardly be called infinite.

rightly so, use to nail down our concepts. To understand God as non-spatial and non-temporal is one thing, but to understand God as transcendent of logic is another. He is freed to be everywhere and nowhere, for example, should he will it. We cannot form a picture of such an entity, since there is no ground upon which it sits to give it form. This state is what the theologian Pseudo-Dionysius calls “darkness.”<sup>25</sup> We might imagine God in clear images as we might a species of animal, but God is found more meaningfully in darkness, where nothing ties Him to anything else or hinders His abilities to be or manifest anything in any combination. Pseudo-Dionysius thusly ends one of his treatises with the words, “...it [my description] will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.”<sup>26</sup>

## **II.2: The Priority of God**

This transcendence, however, is precisely what we should expect of God, since God is prior to all other than Himself. By ‘prior’ here, recall, I do not mean that God occupies a time temporally prior to all other than Himself, but rather, that everything other than Himself depends upon Him either directly or indirectly without God depending on these things. In fact, the colloquial, temporal meaning of prior would be impossible here, since time is among the things that God is prior to. Also, the meaning that I use here does not include every case that the first meaning would apply to. I, for example, was alive before my younger sister, but I am not prior to her, since my realization did not allow or cause hers.<sup>27</sup> God’s priority is therefore not exclusive of things of infinite age or priority among multiple things that transcend time. We can be of sure footing in considering God causally prior to all other than Himself because of the following deduction:

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<sup>25</sup> Lossky, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>27</sup> At least not obviously. Some might argue otherwise, but that is besides the point here.

1. God is the Creator of all other than Himself (commonly-held attribute of God given the reality of at least some created things).
2. To be the creator of a thing 'x' is to be prior to it, since creation by definition requires the bringing into being of what is created, and every created thing depends upon that which brings it into being for its being.
3. God is causally prior to all other than Himself.

From this, we can see that in affirming that God is the Creator of all other than Himself, He is prior to all other than Himself. Were this not true of God, He could not be postulated as a creator in the sense in which people speak of Him, for something else would have 'beat Him to it,' so to speak, and be responsible for the bringing into being of some things; things outside of God could simply exist independently of Him. And again, were anything to exist independently of God's causing or allowing it to be such, like being, for example, then there would be a common ground, so to speak, that unifies God and these independently-existing things, and this thing would be broader than and at least equally fundamental as God, which is absurd. God would cease from being God. Even if not greater, it would be at least as great as God, being not prior to Him and encompassing both God and other entities, and this would make God not the greatest conceivable being, just as an Olympic runner is not the greatest if He ties for the gold medal. God would become "one more object in the inventory of things that are."<sup>28</sup> Thus, God is prior to everything. To quote Mulla Sadra, "God is not to be found within the realm of beings, for He is being of all realms."<sup>29</sup>

Another way of explaining this is to compare the world that we inhabit to a dream; like the inhabitants of a dream, we are constrained by certain limits that are placed on us by virtue of

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<sup>28</sup> Hart, David Bentley. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013., 30.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 107.

living in a single, common world. Just as the inhabitants of dreams cannot escape the dreamer himself, we cannot escape our limits, not because of arbitrary or legislated rules, but because of *what* we are—creatures.<sup>30</sup> God, like the dreamer, however, is by His nature prior to and transcendent of all that is in the dream and the dream itself. Unless God lives in something like a dream-world in the way that the dreamer lives in the real world, He has no constraints or ambient foundation or ground of any kind that would give form to Him or His actions contrary to or independently of His will. As stated above, this is because this other thing would usurp God's very God-ness.

### **II.3: The Consequences of Transcendence for Our Theology**

This conclusion, namely, that God is prior to everything else, is not of trivial importance, for it does not merely concern the origin of what we now know and perceive. Pseudo-Dionysius writes, “He is the reality beneath time and the eternity behind being... God is not some kind of being.”<sup>31</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius argues that since God is not constrained by logic or even being, we cannot apply terms or names to Him properly, since such names refer to beings as we know them, and God is not among these or at least not bound by what binds them.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, we cannot speak anything of God in the affirmative, that is, cataphatically. This conclusion is a result of the unknowability of God included in his transcendence, and I therefore argue that it is built into the idea that God is totally transcendent. Pseudo-Dionysius writes, “my advice to you... is to leave behind you every perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward [non-conceptual] union with him who is beyond all being and

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<sup>30</sup> Pierce, Kenneth. “Foundational Grounding and the Argument from Contingency.” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. “The Divine Names.” In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 47-132. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987., 98.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

knowledge” and repeats this sentiment elsewhere as well.<sup>33</sup> So, to give definite attributes to God is to make certain presumptions about the applicability of very human, or at least created, ideas to an entity that is completely transcendent. To negate attributes is more appropriate, but Dionysius cautions us against understanding this as meaning the opposite of their corresponding affirmations, since “we should not conclude that these negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations [in the sense in which the opposite of wise is foolish, for example], but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.”<sup>34</sup> However, apophatic theology is more accurate in that it cuts off certain ideas of God without replacing them with others. If I say that God is wise, a catopathic statement, then I am asserting that God has the same attribute as other wise things and is thusly roped into a category with them. I am also asserting that God has the opposite attribute of foolishness, has a certain degree of knowledge, judgment, and other such things necessary for wisdom among creation. Recall what Maimonides wrote, “...that there is no similarity in any way whatsoever between Him and His creatures; that His [being] is not like the [being] of His creatures, His life not like that of any living being, His wisdom not like the wisdom of the wisest of men; and that the difference between Him and His creatures is not merely quantitative, but absolute as between two individuals of two different classes...”<sup>35</sup> When speaking of God and wisdom, then, it is best to say that God is not wise and not unwise, for He is transcendent of wisdom, at least in any human concept of it, for God is beyond concept. In the words of Dionysius, God, “unconfined by form, is the creator of all form. In it [God] is nonbeing really an excess of being.”<sup>36</sup>

Gregory Palamas writes on the matter, “He is not nature because He is beyond all nature, and

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<sup>33</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. “The Mystical Theology.” In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 133-142. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987., 135.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 73.

He is not being because He is beyond all beings, and He is not nor does He possess form because He is beyond form.”<sup>37</sup> In apophasis, then, one allows God to be what He is— beyond categorization.

It is not as though in apophasis, we exclude God from things, cutting them away from Him. Properly understood, apophasis recognizes transcendence, which does not equate to exclusivity per the definitions of each.<sup>38</sup> No predicate is exclusive to God, since to be so would involve being unable to be encompassed by God. God, however, is prior to all of creation and is totally free, so He is not such that it is *impossible* to take any predicate, even if He *chooses* not to. In the end, however, there is simply no language that we can piece together to describe accurately and without shortcoming God in His fullness, for language is all about particularity, and God has no “poverty of particularity,” to borrow a phrase from David Bentley Hart.<sup>39</sup> While apophatic theology is often more appropriate than cataphatic theology, then, it suffers from an inability to have the final word on God, who cannot put into words, and it is much less helpful in shaping a picture of God than cataphatic theology. Even if the statement, “God is not-wise,” technically an apophatic statement, is true without reservation, all we would know is that “wise” cannot be predicated of God. Approaching God without the weariness of puerile pictures of a finite being that inhabits the universe as you and I do, this statement isn’t very informative. Even when dealing with a picture of a finite God who exclusively inhabits the universe and is limited in power, one can make such apophatic statements all day. So, where does this leave us? God is totally transcendent and cannot be corralled conceptually by our language. This is

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<sup>37</sup> Palamas, Gregory. *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988., 175.

<sup>38</sup> The definition of transcendence used here can be found in the first section, Terms and Definitions. For a predicate to be exclusive to a subject is to be unable to be predicated of the subject. Therefore, “married” is exclusive to “bachelor,” but “short” is not, even though bachelors are not compelled by definition to be short.

<sup>39</sup> Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest*, 27. I do not mean that language cannot describe abstract things; for it obviously can. What I mean is that God is too vast, primordial, and encompassing to be accurately put into words. I would very strongly recommend Pseudo-Dionysius’ “The Divine Names” in its entirety for more information.

problematic for philosophers and theologians, but it is not new. To quote Job, “Nothing is impossible for You [God]... .Who will tell me what I know not, things too great and wonderful, which I did not know?”<sup>40</sup>

#### **II.4: Objections**

Having explained and defended the strong Palamite and more broadly Pseudo-Dionysian stance on divine transcendence, I will refute some potential objections. Some hold the counter-proposition that God is maximally powerful and therefore perfect, but there are some things that He cannot do, making His power finite by my definition. Both Thomas Aquinas and Maimonides held this view.<sup>41</sup> Both of them argue that this does not imply that God is weak, since things that are truly impossible are not possible for God, and things that plainly cannot be done should not be counted as obstacles that defeat God. Furthermore, some things are clearly impossible, and impossibility must extend to all agents. This position, however, is faulty in multiple ways. Even if we cannot imagine what it would be like to be able to do a task, we can imagine that God can do it, and we can also imagine that God can do absolutely anything. This we should not expect to be able to picture ourselves doing, since we are bound by constraints that God is not bound by, and this leads me to my next point. Impossibility can only be present when there is something to cause or impose the impossibility. When someone claims that a task is impossible, no one is asking an unanswerable question when he responds, “why?” Since God transcends any of these that might be present elsewhere, nothing for Him is impossible. In other words, nothing is blankly impossible without reason; it is impossible as a consequence of something, and any such things that lead to the arising of impossibilities are not so powerful that God cannot work around them. Aquinas and Maimonides falsely assume either that that which is

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<sup>40</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008., Job 42:2-3.

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, 144, Cohen, 100.

impossible in our own system of logic is also impossible without it or that our own system of logic applies even to God, and I have already dispelled this latter notion, as well as the former just now.

One might bring up the famously contradictory square circle here, arguing that the natures of squares and circles make such a shape impossible even for God, on the grounds that squares are only squares in virtue of having certain qualities, and the same is true of circles. Since a square circle would include properties that exclude each other and that derive their presence in the square circle from the very natures of squares and circles, not even God could combine the two into one shape. There are two ways to defeat this argument. The first is to point out that the natures of squares and circles are dependent upon God.<sup>42</sup> This being the case, I find it plausible enough to dispel this argument that God could have made their natures different from how they are in this universe and harmonious with each other. Philo of Alexandria seems to hold such a view; he writes in *On the Creation* that God created the immaterial forms or ideas that concrete objects instantiate before He created anything else, yet they are still His creations.<sup>43</sup> Such a stance is also unsurprisingly defended by Descartes, who held that God created absolutely everything outside of Him. In fact, he wrote specially on geometrical shapes, writing, “You ask what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world.”<sup>44</sup> Even if this is not the case, however, God is, as Palamas says, the “Master of necessities,” who cannot be

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<sup>42</sup> Recall that all that is outside of God is his creation, and that creation does not have to be within time, nor does priority.

<sup>43</sup> Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*. Leiden: Brill, 2001., 50.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Cunning. Note that in this quote, Descartes compares the creation of a certain kind of circle to the creation of the whole world. Perhaps he means to imply that the creation of any one thing in the universe entails that some universe has been created.

made “subject to necessities.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, God could make it such that the property of having four, straight sides and having a homogenous, regular curvature are not contradictory. Again, we do not have to be able to imagine this occurring, simply *that* it could occur. All that is needed is the understanding that law of non-contradiction and other such laws are part of creation. Of course, this only discusses things that God *could* bring about, not whether or not He *would*, which is beside the point. If God exists and created the world, then He created a system with regular and predictable laws and constant objects that persist across time and space. What I am claiming here is that He did not have to create a world like this if He creates a world, largely because this would require something to impose this restriction.

Perhaps someone will argue here that there is some force, such as logic or being, that is equally powerful as and not dependent upon God that holds His power in check. This is an absurd notion, again for multiple reasons. To begin with, God is by definition prior to all other than Him, so this second force would need to be dependent, either through creation or thorough allowance, on God. Against those who would say that I am defining a solution into existence through adding this priority to my definition of God, bear in mind that it is a common assertion and that I stated from the outset that I would try to cause minimal damage to commonly-held ideas about God. In any case, such a model could only apply to either finitely-powerful entities or entities that only can exert themselves towards one task in an infinite quantity of effort, the latter of which would be ultimately finite as well. In the former case, an example would be branches of a government limited by a constitution. One might have authority over the other in some cases, but the other might have authority over the first in cases of equal importance and effect. In this way, they can be equally powerful and not dependent upon each other for their being. One might have infinite power insofar as it can pass infinite laws, but the other is equally

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<sup>45</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 192.

infinitely powerful in its ability to judge infinite cases, but they are really both finite in power.<sup>46</sup>

As for the latter case, one can imagine two wrestlers of infinite forward-pushing power who forever counterbalance each other by pushing on each other in precisely opposite directions, and thusly standing still. Similarly, we can imagine a God who cannot overwhelm a certain obstacle held in place by a force not dependent upon Him that has equal and therefore insurmountable power relative to God. God's power in this case, while maximal, is not infinite. The proponent of this model might object that God and the force might have equally infinite power, but since there is a limitation on God's power, His power is not infinite because it cannot achieve any purpose, and the same goes for the force that foils Him. Therefore, I propose that God must have not only unsurpassable power, but also power that is not matched. For matched power implies limitation, and limitation implies finitude, even when combined with an infinite quantity of power. This is no different than the observation that between any two finite quantities, there is an infinite quantity of unique quantities. Since God's transcendence follows from His omnipotence, in defending His omnipotence, His transcendence is also defended.

Yet another might object to God's unknowability, an aspect of His transcendence, on the grounds that unknowability cannot be said of anything without an exterior metric in the form of a knower. This is because it relies on the ability of a knower and is therefore, the objector would argue, a relative attribute not held by anything truly. If this were the case, then God would be unknowable because of our own shortcomings as humans rather than because of some quality of unknowability in God. This is the teaching of Aquinas, in fact.<sup>47</sup> Aquinas taught that different creatures experience God in different ways, and though none comprehend Him, He is revealed

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<sup>46</sup> This is another example of a case in which infinity of power in one respect is compatible with a more holistic or important limitation on power.

<sup>47</sup> Aquinas, 56.

more or less to different creatures.<sup>48</sup> But let us consider simply whether one can know God in a dualistic way in which one either can or cannot. Even Aquinas admits that no one can comprehend God, and all of our reasoning on transcendence and priority up to this point reveals that God is not comprehended.<sup>49</sup> This is not due to a smallness of intellect on the part of all created things, but rather, the fact that God *necessarily* is unbound by the laws of logic and conceptual grounds like being that we use to understand or know objects. Since God is necessarily transcendent of these, He would be unknowable to any creation, and this is not because of the way that particular created beings think, but rather because God is empty of knowable content.<sup>50</sup> Even a theoretical ‘super-knower,’ from whom nothing is hidden could not know God, for there is nothing particular, neither a predicate in language nor even a shade or idea in thought that God is not prior to and transcendent of. We know and agree that He is simple, so there can be no jumping in thought from one part to another.<sup>51</sup> What then is left? A God that cannot be known because of His own God-ness, not because of the intellectual capacity or methods of any creation, real or potential is. And if neither real nor potential creatures can know Him, then He is unknowable independently of an exterior metric. To say that God is unknowable is akin to saying that He is God. This is because we have established that God must be totally transcendent, and that which is totally transcendent is unknowable by entailment.

Pseudo-Dionysius summarizes it best:

“Given that the good [God] transcends everything, as indeed it does, its nature, unconfined by form, is the creator of all form. In it is nonbeing really an excess of being. It is not a life, but is, rather, superabundant Life. It is not a mind, but is superabundant Wisdom.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Aquinas, 56.

<sup>50</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “Divine Names”, 53.

<sup>51</sup> This is per Section I, in which I assume divine simplicity since it is so commonly held of God. I also hold that Aquinas proved it beyond any doubt in *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 3: “On the Simplicity of God,” for further reference.

<sup>52</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “Divine Names,” 73.

At this point, the objector may wonder that I, having defended God's lack of limits, have insisted that there is not even a potential created knower of God. But consider that a knowable God is not a totally transcendent one, and God compromises His God-ness by not being transcendent. This is not a limit placed on Him, since transcendence is not distance or vagueness but an overflowing of being, as Pseudo-Dionysius writes. It is not absence but more presence than creatures can unite into concepts. God is the fundament of everything that is or can be so much so that we cannot define Him against that which lacks Him, in the Pseudo-Dionysian model. God is too great to be known. This is what is meant by the lack of potential creatures that can know God, that is, not weakness, but strength. However, as we will see, this is not the end of the matter.

Finally, what is perhaps the greatest objection to this teaching of total transcendence and unknowability is not one of logical inconsistency but the fact that it apparently disallows us from ascribing attributes to God in a meaningful way. If God remains in the defensible but distant state of transcendence, then we have no way of describing Him without falling into either error or lack of clarity. To return to my earlier example, one can accurately say that God is neither wise nor unwise; He is the source of wisdom but is also beyond and without it in that He goes, so to speak, where wisdom cannot. A long list of apophatic denials may be useful, but if unchecked in some way, it culminates in the denial of philosophy's applicability to God, which seeks rightfully to nail down objects of inquiry with concepts, or even to one's own life. Importantly, this is also true of theology, even the theology of the tradition that we are dealing with, and Palamas was obliged to defend the imminence of God, that is, the knowability and presence of God in and to creation. A significant problem arises, however, when one must affirm both God's total transcendence and His imminence, since, as aforementioned, they are

negations of each other. To affirm both is to call God knowable and unknowable, not a compromise or split difference of the two, as well as present in and totally beyond the universe. To affirm both without addressing this problem would be to leave oneself open to attack and possibly leave one's model of God in tatters. Nevertheless, as I spoke of in my introduction, Palamas considered the imminence and knowability of God to be of the utmost importance for theology and, even more broadly, the lives of religious people in general.

### III. Divine Imminence

According to Vladimir Lossky, one of the most prominent Eastern Christian scholars of the twentieth century, "it would be possible to draw up two sets of texts taken from the Bible and the Fathers, contradictory to one another; the first to show the inaccessible character of the divine nature, the second asserting that God does communicate Himself, can be known experientially, and can really be attained to in union."<sup>53</sup> This is precisely the problem that Palamas was forced to address against Barlaam, who was willing to sacrifice imminence and knowability for transcendence and unknowability. Since we now face a similar problem, I will here give a case for divine imminence inspired by Palamas'. Recall that imminence, as we defined it earlier, is the being-with that allows for knowability, and divine imminence refers also to the presence of God in creation. The sort of knowability discussed here is primarily factual knowledge, rather than experiential knowledge, although the latter will be discussed as well. Also remember that the knowability of God does not entail that God is known, simply that He can be known, and since imminence is imminence *to* something, divine imminence to creation could only be realized when creation was, so it is not eternal.<sup>54</sup> Here I will argue that God is imminent to

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<sup>53</sup> Lossky, 68.

<sup>54</sup> One might ask whether the capacity to be known can be realized instead of by definition always being real. To begin with, knowability is not the sole determiner of divine imminence, which also includes the presence of God.

creation, and in the following section, I will explain how this can be true without compromising God's transcendence.

### III.1: Speaking About God

Maimonides holds, "He [God] is the cause and the universe the effect."<sup>55</sup> This is a belief that is common to most believers in the existence of God, yet having looked at God's transcendence, it is now striking. It places God in a chain of cause and effect, which connects God to His creation in a seemingly immutable way. Furthermore, there is little truth in saying that God is not the creator of the universe, since the universe exists, and if God is to exist, then He is its creator. From our perspective, there is no way for God to escape His creator-ship. A commentator on Maimonides, A. Cohen, writes, "if the Deity is to be anything more than an abstraction of thought, it is inevitable that we should think and speak of Him "in the language of the children of men" [a phrase of Maimonides]. From this fact springs the danger of misapprehending God, because we view Him through a distorting medium."<sup>56</sup> It would seem, then, that we have nailed down God through his relationship to His creation, which is implied by its being His creation. Of course, this does not mean that God could not have avoided creating the universe to begin with; very few theists doubt that. What is significant here is that we have made a cataphatic statement about God that is unqualifiedly true. One might say here that the statement is ultimately about the universe, i.e., 'the universe is created by God,' but a merely semantic change that does not alter the meaning results in 'God created the universe.' Perhaps this succeeds in nailing down God because it does so through a relationship that He has, rather than qualities that are ascribed to God in Himself.

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Also, this is no different than a human's ability to enter a building is realized only when the building is built. It is not that the human gains some new skill, but that the vessel for his presence has been made ready for it.

<sup>55</sup> Cohen, 55.

<sup>56</sup> Cohen, 83.

In any case, it is necessary that we be able to make some meaningful statements about God such as this one. Philosophy and theology rely on it, and the latter could be said to be the practice of putting God's attributes or nature into words to the degree that this is possible. If it is not possible at all, then theology is completed before it begins. Palamas recognized this when he argued against Barlaam on the grounds that if Barlaam's idea of a totally transcendent God were not held in conjunction with the idea of a God who could be reasoned about and known, the very theology that Barlaam confessed as an Orthodox Christian would be undermined.<sup>57</sup> In this way, the essence-energies distinction is a defense of theology as a viable field of study. This is not to mention doctrine, which is cognitive and intellectual in that doctrines are thoughts with subjects and predicates that are given assent by an authority and concern God or His effects. A totally transcendent and thus unknowable God does not lend Himself to this in the affirmation of His total transcendence and unknowability. Nor does He lend Himself to the religious experiences or religious life of humans that involve God. If He cannot be known, then no one can undertake or be the receiver of experiences that involve knowing or gaining knowledge of God. For many, life is stripped of value if they have no possibility of knowing God. I do not note this not so that we will feel pressure to fabricate lies for their docility, but rather in order to point out the importance to humanity of being able to know God in the case that God exists. As already mentioned, however, there is reason independent of this to believe that God is in some sense knowable, that is, in His relationships with creation, which, to clarify, I take here to be the sum of all non-God things.<sup>58</sup> This is especially pressing within the tradition of Palamas and his opponents, since it contains an emphasis on prayer and other such practices that were intended to realize God's presence for the subject and to bring about knowledge of Him in both senses of

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<sup>57</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 44.

<sup>58</sup> cf. *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 239.

knowing someone. In fact, Palamas states that the very goal of life is “being in Him” and “paricipa[tion] of Hi[m].”<sup>59</sup>

### III.2: God’s Interaction with Creation

There is also an expectation of God, presuming our own existence as His creation, to interact with us, and for this He needs to ‘enter into’ the universe somehow. Palamas taught that the whole universe is in God, and He is in turn in it, sustaining it, though not through material means, for God is immaterial.<sup>60</sup> God cannot be materially present in creation, but His setting up of matters to be the way that they are, like the laws of physics, reveals a certain divine pervasiveness in creation. Palamas himself also held, as do most theists both then and now, that there is a divine presence in the world that is knowable. Without imminence, this is impossible. Even the aforementioned providence of God, however, informs us that He does have a relationship with the universe in a causal way, as He would also even if He only created it. Since God is non-spatial, however, His presence is not like the presence of you or I who can affect matters remotely without being present, for our presence is defined by our material location. God’s presence, on the other hand, is wherever He is a controlling factor, which would be everywhere if He exists and is truly God. David Bentley Hart points out, additionally, that if God is indeed the ground upon which all else sits, we are constantly engaged with Him by virtue of being. He writes, “God is not only the ultimate reality that the intellect and the will seek but is also the primordial reality with which all of us are always engaged in every moment of existence and consciousness, apart from which we have no experience of anything whatsoever.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, God is in everything and everything is in Him. Furthermore, this means that God is, from our

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<sup>59</sup> Palamas, Gregory. *The Triads*. Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983., 18.

<sup>60</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 201.

<sup>61</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 10. I will argue in the way of Palamas that this is true specifically of the divine energies.

perspective, something with being, since He could not give what He does not have. Palamas uses this to argue that only in a certain sense is God without being, for in another, the one pertinent to our lives in this world, He most definitely has being.<sup>62</sup> It is His transcendence that allows Him the freedom to inhabit both.

Even those who posit alone that God's power is pertinent to the ethical order of the world are bound to hold that God holds some relationship to creation, since the moral order is a part of creation, albeit an immaterial one. Through God's activity, we know Him and His ways. David Bradshaw observes that Aristotle, who held the view that the world is everlasting but dependent upon God, taught that God is imminent, and this can be known because of His interaction with the world.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, a multitude of philosophers have observed that God's will and existence are evident from even mundane observation of the world. Plato and Aristotle, who did not receive a living tradition of theism in the same way that later Western thinkers did, both concluded, though in different ways, that their observations of this world pointed to God's existence and will.<sup>64</sup>

Philo of Alexandria, several centuries later, wrote,

“it is quite enough for a man's reasoning faculty to advance as far as to learn that the cause of the universe is and subsists. To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about the essence or quality in God, is a folly fit for the world's childhood. Not even Moses, the all-wise, did God accord this... all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man's apprehension, while He Himself alone is beyond it...”

and in doing so, prefigures many of Palamas' words.<sup>65</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, in the *Divine Names*, wrote,

“It might be more accurate to say that we cannot know God in His nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or of reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and

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<sup>62</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 227.

<sup>63</sup> Bradshaw, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Some argue that Plato is not a theist, but in comparing him to the others that I list here, I think that he clearly speaks of what they speak of, at least to the extent that his inclusion here is merited.

<sup>65</sup> Bradshaw, 63.

this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms... God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things.”<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, St. Basil wrote, “If knowledge of God’s essence is categorically omitted, what kind of knowledge remains?” Basil gives an answer: “I repeat; knowledge is manifold— it involves perception of our creator, recognition of His wonderful works, observance of His commandments, and co-dwelling with Him.”<sup>67</sup> Note here that Basil speaks of this knowledge in contrast to knowledge of God’s essence in keeping with the tradition of transcendence and unknowability. Unsurprisingly, Thomas Aquinas also held that we can learn about God by natural reason through material creation, though Aquinas, unlike Basil, taught that God is supremely intelligible.<sup>68</sup> Palmas himself wrote, “ we can say that the universe which we see is, as it were a writing of the hypostatic Word.”<sup>69</sup>

### III.3: Objections

Even if these pieces of knowledge about God are not intimate or full knowledge of God, they are genuine pieces of knowledge about God, whom we have already called unknowable. Therefore, there must be something more to a complete model of God than mere, exuberant transcendence of all that we know. This fuller vision of the model I will discuss in detail in the next section, but I will first examine some objections to God’s imminence. These I imagine to be fewer than objections to God’s total transcendence, since the application of human thought to God in a meaningful way that corresponds to real truths about God is a common practice among philosophers of the present, and so most rightfully assume that it is possible. But suppose that God does not interact in any way with the world. Suppose that He exists parallel to us, so to

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<sup>66</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 109.

<sup>67</sup> Torrance, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas, 61, Williams, Anna. “Deification in Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas. Ph.D diss., Yale University, 1995, Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 9538699., 96.

<sup>69</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 118.

speaking, with neither the universe depending upon Him nor He on us, and He chooses not to interact with us. In such a case, God would not have created the universe, and the two are co-eternal. He surely is not imminent then. My response to this is that such a God would not be God at all, partially for reasons expressed in my section on transcendence in which I argue that God must be prior to everything else. But, the objector continues, what about a God who is not prior to everything else, but rather, is contemplated in His goodness as an exemplar of goodness that we ought to strive towards? In response to this, I would point out firstly that this is a case of humans conceiving of God in concrete and cataphatic terms that is apparently grating to the proponent of total transcendence. It still presumes imminence to some degree. Secondly, this model gives God a role to play that, while perhaps not as significant as that of creator and sustainer, is nevertheless a role that involves penetration into the world via the minds of those who contemplate Him. This model, a Platonic one indeed, relegates God's direct effects to immaterial ones, but if we are willing to posit the existence of an entirely immaterial being, then we should not shy away from the reality of immaterial effects, which in this case would lead to material moral actions anyways.

Another objection might be that God can interact with the world without being knowable in any way. This I confess I find hard to conceive of. We can certainly form a sentence expressing the thought, but I cannot imagine God interacting with the world without being knowable. Bear in mind that being knowable and being known are two different matters. God could conceivably act but hide Himself, yet still be knowable. If God interacts with the world really, then we can accurately say that He interacts with the world, and this is a piece of knowledge about Him. It is not like claiming His transcendence because that is a negation, not a cataphatic affirmation about something that God really does. Another way to think about it is in

terms of roles. God cannot interact with the world without a role in doing so. If He creates, He is a Creator, for example. Without a role, He does not interact with the world, but if He has a role, then we can say something to the effect of, “God has ‘x’ role that He fulfills.” Therefore, it is absurd to speak of God interacting with the world in an unknowable way, even if the way in which He does is not actually known.

#### **IV. The Essence-Energies Distinction**

Now that I have established both the transcendence of God and the imminence of God as legs upon which we can reasonably stand and, importantly, be unwilling to reject or compromise one in order to more fully embrace the other, I will detail and defend the model, formulated first by Gregory Palamas, that allows both to be fully true of God. My goal here is to show that the model succeeds in doing this and is plausible in its own right as a model of God; I will not try to argue that it cannot fail to be true or that there are no alternatives.

##### **IV.1: The Essence of God**

The essence of God, according to Gregory Palamas, is what makes God what He is. It is simple and unchanging.<sup>70</sup> The essence of God, however, is entirely transcendent of and independent of all that is not God, so it is, in fact, super-essential, not like other, created essences, and this is according to the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius. An ordinary essence, like that of you or me, can be categorized as an essence in the set of all essences. God is super-essential so as to not require categorization or cataphatic statements concerning essences as a whole. Palamas writes in his *One-Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, “He is not nature because He is beyond all nature, and He is not being because He is beyond all beings, and He is not nor does He possess form because He is beyond form.”<sup>71</sup> The super-essential essence of God, being the

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<sup>70</sup> Palamas, *The Triads*, 82.

<sup>71</sup> Palamas, *The One-Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 175.

hook upon which anything else that is of God hangs, must therefore be transcendent; it is, so to speak, the beginning of God, prior in a non-temporal sense to all else. It is the first and most prior thing to exist at all, in fact.<sup>72</sup> As such, it is unknowable and transcendent in the highest degree, beyond both knowledge and unknowing.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, Palamas stresses the utter transcendence of the essence in his defense of the imminence of God against the accusations of Barlaam. This is because he did not want there to be any possibility of compromising God's transcendence for the sake of imminence, something that Thomas Aquinas arguably does in his assertion that the essence of God is knowable and participable experientially by humans.<sup>74</sup> This relationship with God Palamas preserves by making it one that we have with the energies, thus preserving the fulfillment of what Aquinas correctly, by Palamite standards, argues is the teleological purpose of humanity— intimacy with God Himself.

The tension between the unknowability of God in His transcendence and the need to ascribe names, which include statements about God's relationship to the world, such as 'Creator,' and statements about His attributes, such as his goodness, comes to a head here. Palamas holds that none of this can be said of God's essence because of its total transcendence. He claims that Barlaam and his supporters betray this tradition of strong transcendence that is evident in Pseudo-Dionysius by denying a real distinction between the essence and the energies of God, for they then must place these names on the essence, which, being super-essential,

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<sup>72</sup> Palamas, being a Trinitarian Christian, argues that the Father is the 'initial' holder, in a sense, of the divine essence, though even He is posterior to the essence itself, since He would not be anything without his own essence. The hypostasis of the Father, however, is not the essence itself. I intentionally omit Trinitarian teachings of Palamas in this essay, since I believe that his essence-energies model can hold for non-Trinitarians just as well as Trinitarians.

<sup>73</sup> Palamas, *The Triads*, 13. What I mean by 'beyond unknowing' is that the divine essence is not knowable but also not having attributes other than those that can be known. It is not as though it inhabits another realm than this universe; it is simply empty of content. Fortunately for us, we do not need to grasp this, but only *that* it is the case. This will be elaborated upon later.

<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, 50-51.

cannot be the bearer of such definite names.<sup>75</sup> Thusly, we must abandon all hope of knowing anything about the essence of God other than that knowledge of it is beyond us and other such affirmations of its transcendence, which are ultimately apophatic statements and ones that do not refer to positively-held attributes of the essence.

#### IV. 2: The Energies of God

In the One-Hundred and Fifty Chapters, Palamas writes the following, a passage that summarizes much of what he has to say in the chapters.

“In this way God is referred to as non-being in a transcendent sense. But one who says this for the purpose of showing that those who say God exists are not speaking correctly is clearly not using apophatic theology in a transcendent sense but rather in the sense of deficiency to the effect that God does not exist at all. This is the acme of impiety, suffered alas by those who attempt through apophatic theology to deny that God possesses both an uncreated essence and energy. But we hold on lovingly to both without having one eliminated by the other, or rather, by means of each we confirm ourselves in an orthodox understanding.”<sup>76</sup>

If Palamas does not allow the essence of God to condescend, even partly, as though the essence of God has parts, to knowability, then what is the bearer of his attributes and relationships? This is his energies taken together. Recalling that the energy of a thing is its capacity or *dunamis* to act or bring about its activity, we can see why Palamas did not have to argue against the idea that God has no energies, for it is clear to those who accept God’s existence that God does *do* something. Consequently, it is equally clear that He has energies, just as you and I do, even if God were not to exercise them. This last point will be important in Section V.

God’s energies are, according to Palamas, the attributes of God. This being the case, God is freed from having to conform his essence to His attributes, and we nevertheless have a knowable God whose attributes are reasonably grounded. It is through the second meaning of the term ‘*energiea*’ that this is the case. God is good, for example, in the same way that an eye

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<sup>75</sup> Palamas, *The One-Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 227.

sees. Maximus the Confessor, a pre-Palamite theologian of the Christian East, speaks of these energies as “all that is contemplated around His essence.”<sup>77</sup> The energies ‘reach out,’ so to speak, and ‘perform’ the attributes of God. They do what is natural for God to do, according to God’s will. Consequently, we can know that these energies are uncreated, for there was never a ‘time’ in which God did not possess His attributes.<sup>78</sup> Now, only God is uncreated; we have established that He is the Creator of all that is not Himself. For this reason, we must conclude that God’s energies are not outside God, though God is not exclusively His energies, since we cannot leave His essence out of His own self. On the matter of the divinity of the energies and their relation to the divine essence, Palamas teaches that the energies are no less divine than the essence. They are not a diminution or a less pure offspring of the essence, nor do they only contain limited portions of divinity.<sup>79</sup> For this reason, I speak of the energies being ‘within’ God, for although an experience of the energies is most definitely, for Palamas, an experience of God, God is not univocally identical to His energies, since this would exclude the divine essence from Him. We have good reason to accept this, for when I exercise my energy to see things, I claim that I am the one doing the seeing. If I took my energies to be outside of me or without me, then I could only claim truthfully that my energies see, think, locomote, remember, feel emotion, etc., on behalf of me. This is not at all how anyone, to my knowledge, thinks of his actions, that is, that they are done *for* him while he is inactive and static throughout his life, so I conclude that energies are not outside of the things that they are the energies of.

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<sup>77</sup> Loudovikos, Nikolaos. “Being and Essence Revisited: Reciprocal Logoi and Energies in Maximus the Confessor and Thomas Aquinas, and the Genesis of the Self-Referring Subject.” *Revista Portuguesa Filosofia* 72(1) (2016): 117-146., 120.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>79</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 117.

### IV. 3: Arguments for the Palamite Relationship Between the Essence and the Energies

That God's energies are really distinct from his essence can be shown in multiple ways. To begin with, essences, which can and do exist in a state of potentiality before becoming actualized within this Aristotelian tradition, only have energies once they are actualized. Indeed, it is held by "the great metaphysical traditions" that an essence is realized only when it has energy.<sup>80</sup> How can something be called real if it has no power to do anything? This state is one of potentiality. Remember that, classically, energies were the power to do what is for their holder to do and the exertion of this power. If something is not able to do anything at all, then the thing cannot be called actual.<sup>81</sup> For we have established that both potentialities and actualities have being, so mere being cannot indicate actualization, nor can having an essence, for essences can exist in a state of potentiality. Furthermore, one cannot imagine a non-energetic yet actual thing, especially considering that energy is, in one sense, the capacity to do what a thing does. Even a corpse does what corpses do, for example. We can see from this that essences and energies are distinct from each other; one can remain itself in the conceptual absence of the other. Now, God does not pass from potentiality to actuality, but rather, He is always real. This means that He always has His energies, since a thing has its energies to the degree that it is real and vice versa; the relationship is one of direct proportionality. Therefore, God's energies are from eternity and uncreated, and everything that is not created is God. From

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<sup>80</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 131. This line of reasoning might be relevant to the relationship in Christological theology between the Monophysite-Dyophysite controversy and the Monothelite-Dyophelate controversy, both of which took place in the first millennium. The first concerned the number of natures that Christ has, with dyophysitism winning the most adherents, and the second concerned the number of wills that Christ has, with Dyothelitism achieving universal acclaim among Dyophysites. Since the will is an energy, it was in keeping with the teaching that Christ has two natures to also teach that He has two wills.

<sup>81</sup> We must be careful when dealing with this classical tradition, influential on Medieval Christian thought in the East and West as it is. Aristotle taught that an eye that is blind is not truly an eye for the very reasons mentioned here. While this may not seem insurmountably implausible, I do not wish to require the reader of this essay to hold this belief. While Aristotle spoke of *energia* in degrees and kinds, I here speak of it in either presence or total absence to avoid such problems.

this, we can know that the divine energies are not creations and are not lesser than or less divine than the essence. This is important because when we speak of the energies or experience them, we do these things to God, not a representation or mediator.

One argument for the real distinction between the essence and the energies that Palamas himself is particularly fond of is one from the multiplicity of energies. If we begin with the presupposition that God's essence is simple, we can know that the energies are distinct from it by showing that they are manifold. To do this, Palamas picks out examples of pairs of energies that must not be one with each other. One of these pairs is that of will and foreknowledge. Since these are both activities of God, they are energies, according to this model. However, will is active, producing preferences and desired outcomes of turns of events, while foreknowledge is, for Palamas and others of pre-Reformation, mainstream Christianity, a reaction on God's part to events that He witnesses, namely, He gains knowledge of them.<sup>82</sup> If these two were one and the same, then God would have to foreknow events in the same 'exertion' of action as willing events, and Palamas concludes that belief in this idea implies belief in one of two things. Either God only foreknows that which He actively wills, in which case His foreknowledge does not apply to nearly all events, or He actively wills everything that occurs, which would mean that God wills that people sin and do all manner of evil. Both of these possibilities he finds unacceptable, so he concludes that God's will and God's foreknowledge are really separate energies. Palamas also contrasts foreknowledge with creation, the former being passive and other latter being active, and creation with adoption, the one requiring the bringing into being of something and the other requiring that the receiver of the action already have being prior to its

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<sup>82</sup> Palamas, *The One-Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 199. God is commonly held to have two wills, one active and one passive. Although Gregory Palamas does not in this particular passage specify that He is speaking of the active will of God, the progression of the argument makes it clear that he is speaking about God's active will. In any case, the distinction between God's two wills counts as a pair of energies that cannot be one and the same because one is active and the other passive, these being mutually exclusive attributes.

reception of God's action. All of these I judge to be sound arguments. Palamas therefore charges those who do not make a real distinction between the essence and the energies with either denying divine simplicity or presenting an incoherent model of God in which His essence is simple yet made up of clearly distinct parts. He quotes from a similar argument from Cyril of Alexandria, who writes, "For many are the attributes which belong by nature to Him alone but to no other being... . . . If then each of His attributes lies in the order of substance, how can the simple not be composite? This is a most absurd conception to hold."<sup>83</sup> Although Cyril did not so explicitly make the essence-energies distinction as Palamas did, we can see precedents for his model in this quote, as we can also in the earlier quote from Maximus the Confessor about God's attributes being contemplated around the divine essence.<sup>84</sup>

Gregory also poses the problem to those who accept divine simplicity but reject the real distinction of degrees of God's activity. It is said that all of creation receives some provisional grace from God, but some parts of creation, like the Prophets, receive more grace in order to do more difficult tasks. This is well attested to in the Bible and its commentaries, but that is besides the point here. Taking this presupposition to be true, we must explain how a simple God can put forth various degrees of His grace, for it seems that if a thing is able to be given in degrees, it must be partitive.<sup>85</sup> Some respond to this by saying that the grace in question is created, but Palamites are quick to respond that created grace deprives us of God's imminence in religious or experiential activity.<sup>86</sup> If it is by grace that we experience God, then we can only ever experience created goods and never God Himself. We would experience a mirage of God, but not the real thing. This is unacceptable to Palamas, and it motivates much of his writings on the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>84</sup> "Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Distinction in the Cappadocian Fathers" by Alexis Torrence and *Aristotle East and West* by David Bradshaw both address such forerunning precedents in depth.

<sup>85</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Aquinas is one of those who uphold created grace, Williams, 101.

matter.<sup>87</sup> For Palamas and the consensus within Orthodox Christianity that he built, to experience the grace of God is to experience God. One argument in favor of this stance begins with the assertion that grace is an energy, since it is an activity of God akin to creation or will. If this is the case, then grace must be uncreated, since the energies of God are His power to act, and nothing can impart such power to God, since God is the creator of all other than Himself. One way of putting this is to ask what power God used to increase His own power. The question is itself absurd, since power, one's capacity for action, cannot increase itself except by using itself to seize power from another, as when the resources of a conquered country are used to increase the power of the conqueror. God, however, is on the one hand omnipotent and on the other the beginning-point of the universe, so His power cannot increase; it is, in fact, inconceivable that it could. Furthermore, God is rightfully called gracious, and if this is to be true of God as a name or description, it must be said of the energies, for neither the divine essence nor things that are not God can bear His names. For these reasons, Palamas rejects the idea of created grace.

The uncreated aspect of grace, as argued for in this manner, is important for the identification of the energies with God. Provided that the divine energies are, as previously mentioned, unoriginate on the grounds that there could be no power to bring them about, if everything outside of God is created, then the energies must be within God, and they are uncreated, for anything that is uncreated is not without God. Although most everyone in Palamas' time agreed that there are divine energies, it was not taken for granted that they were within God. In fact, Barlaam was fond of the idea of created energies, which Palamas found absurd. At the same time, he found it equally absurd that the energies are essential, as we have now seen. Gregory often uses an analogy of the sun to express his model as it appears in this argument, and the parallel is quite accurate. If God is like the sun, His energies are the rays. We

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<sup>87</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 55. (introduction by Robert Sinkewicz)

only know the sun by its rays; even when looking directly at the sun, what we experience is a collection of rays that nevertheless indicate a single sun because of their relation to one another and their evident common origin. In the same way, it is not by revelation but by reason that we can know that God's energies are not one, but many. The analogy continues. Our observation of the rays of the sun, which, incidentally, provide for life on Earth as God, in a more holistic way, does, indicate that there is more to the sun than its rays, for it would be absurd to think that the rays are not dependent in their arising and activity of traveling and illuminating upon something else. This something else is analogous to the divine essence, upon which the energies are indeed dependent.<sup>88</sup> However, the sun remains one sun, and an absence of its rays would indicate that it has passed out of reality. Nevertheless, it is the rays that are dependent upon the sun, not the sun on its own rays, its own activity.

Finally, we must consider what possible configurations we have concerning essence, energies, and creation, all of which are accepted by both Palamites and anti-Palamites insofar as they are said to be real, as regards names or attributes for God. We know that the essence of God cannot be named, for it is transcendent and simple, both of which preclude it from being the bearer of the attributes of God, and creation is by definition outside of God entirely in terms of its identity. Therefore, unless we introduce some other sort of distinct entity into the model, I see no other option than to hang the attributes of God on the energies.<sup>89</sup> Nor is this a conclusion that we should accept only when forced to by this lack of alternatives. As I have hopefully shown, through both my own reasoning and Palamas', it is plausible that the energies of God are really distinct from the essence and are bearers of God's attributes or names, such that we can hold that

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<sup>88</sup> Palamas, *The Triads*, 63-64.

<sup>89</sup> Both Palamas and his opponents accepted that the hypostases of the Trinity are distinct from their essence and its energies, but I found no example of anyone, Eastern or Western, assigning the attributes of God to any of the hypostases.

God is totally transcendent of such categorization and also meaningfully described by these names. There are, nevertheless, a number of reasons why one might doubt the Palamite model, and I will now address what I judge to be the most pressing of these.

## **V. Objections to the Essence-Energies Distinction**

### **V.1: Divine Simplicity**

An objection on the grounds of simplicity might be the most intuitive objection to this model of God, and Western, especially Roman Catholic, theologians have used precisely this objection against the East regarding the divine energies and other matters as well. Although we have already seen that Palamas affirms divine simplicity, many, particularly followers of Aquinas, allege that this is either a contradiction or unsubstantial lip service.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, let us begin by examining Aquinas' arguments for simplicity to see what motivates him. Firstly, he points out that God, lacking a body, cannot be divided into material and immaterial parts, and being wholly immaterial, He is not infinitely divisible quantitatively as bodies are. This is fairly obvious, but his next argument I find definitively convincing. Since "every composite is posterior to its component parts and is dependent upon them," but God is neither posterior nor dependent upon anything, He cannot be composite. Furthermore, parts of composite wholes cannot be themselves the whole, and this means that were God complex, there would be multiple parts of Him that are not Him yet are prior to Him.<sup>91</sup> Of course, this presumes that parts are prior to their wholes, but I find this belief unavoidable. A brick that is part of a building is of the same identity before and after it is placed into the building, for example. The fact that a part shows itself to be a part only when the whole is present does not make the part itself the object that it is any more than I become a different person by receiving a college degree. In another section on

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<sup>90</sup> Palamas, *The Triads*, 82, for one example of Palamas claiming divine simplicity. It is by no means the only one.

<sup>91</sup> Aquinas, 1, 3, 7.

the same matter, Aquinas reasonably argues that there could have been no efficient cause for God, but complex objects must have an efficient cause to bring together their parts. For an efficient cause of God cannot be God Himself, and everything that is not God is created by God. God cannot be efficiently caused by something that He caused, and so we can rule out every agent that is real or could be real as a suspect of being God's efficient cause. Yet, everything that is complex has an efficient cause, and everything that is not complex is simple. Therefore, God is simple.<sup>92</sup>

Aquinas' main motivation to protect the simplicity of God, then, is his conviction that God does not have parts or divisibility.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, it seems that to reject one is to hold the other, since nothing can be both with parts and simple or neither one nor the other. However, Palamas does not consider the energies to be parts of God, as though each contains some of Him or a component of Him.<sup>94</sup> He writes,

“Goodness, Wisdom, Majesty, or Providence are not parts of God, but He Himself is wholly Goodness, Wisdom, Providence, and Majesty; for, being unique, He does not divide Himself, but He possesses as His own each of these energies and manifests Himself fully by His presence and His action in each of these in a unified, simple and indivisible fashion.”<sup>95</sup>

That the divine energies are not parts of God is also evident when one considers that Palamas teaches that the essence of God is prior to His energies. We have already established in Section IV that the divine essence would not be real without God's energies, but would exist in a state of potentiality, which is absurd, for no force could move God Himself from potentially to actuality. We know this for at least two reasons. On the one hand, God does not change. On the other, no non-divine force could act upon God to bring about His reality, and He could not do this for

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 1, 3, 4.

<sup>93</sup> I speak of both having parts and divisibility here, since Aquinas speaks of the infinite divisibility of material bodies, per Aristotle. If this referred only to the parts of the body, then each body would have infinite parts, and I do not wish to commit myself to this in this essay.

<sup>94</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 117.

<sup>95</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 220.

Himself, since to be able to do such a thing, which is done by energies, presumes reality.

Conversely, there could be no divine energies without a divine essence to be the bearer of the energies, for this is the nature of energies. Therefore, the divine energies invariably indicate the existence of the divine essence, and the divine essence invariably indicates the existence of divine energies. Houses, on the other hand, are built by uniting planks of wood through an efficient cause, and books are written by uniting words through an efficient cause, but in both of these cases, the components can stand alone or be united with each other. This is not the case with the divine essence and the divine energies, so Aquinas and his followers need not fear. Unless someone claims that the sun's rays are part of the sun, no one is justified in claiming that the divine energies are parts of God.

It is furthermore an error in one's very understanding of what energies are, divine or not, to think that they are parts of their bearers. Using Aristotle's example of seeing being an energy of an eye, it seems odd, to say the least, to hold that 'seeing' or even 'the ability to see' is a *part* of an eye. It seems rather that this energy is some quasi-accident of an eye that is present as a result of the eye's being present. Remember again the useful analogy of the sun; the rays are present with and around the sun not because they are components of the sun itself, but the sun's being a real sun implies the presence of rays. This is precisely how God's energies are described relative to his essence by Palamas, and indeed, by other theologians before him.<sup>96</sup>

Taking the offensive against such accusers who believe that divine simplicity entails a denial of his model, the Palamite can present a dilemma. Those who hold this view must hold one of two views. Bear in mind that one cannot merely deny the existence of either God's essence or God's energies. The first view is that God's energies are distinct from each other and God's essence but are not divine, preserving divine simplicity. However, if a person holds this,

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<sup>96</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 47, 241.

he will be forced to conclude that what we take to be experiences of God or knowledge of His attributes is really only experiences and knowledge of some non-divine creation, and this is unacceptable. The second view is that the energies are not distinct from each other or the divine essence, but rather, there are no distinctions of any sort in God. This view entails belief that when one experiences God or has knowledge of His attributes, he has full experience or knowledge of the entirety of God. Each of these views is unacceptable because it leaves us where we started, that is, unable to preserve both divine imminence and divine transcendence. The first view denies imminence relative to humans, since that which we know of God, His energies, are, in fact, not really God. The second view denies transcendence by asserting that there is nothing of God that we cannot know and experience.

Additionally, we already have good reason to believe that God's energies are distinct from one another. Multiple attributes must be multiple energies, since what is said of one attribute cannot be said of another. If this is the case and it is true that the energies are not distinct from the essence in order for divine simplicity to hold, then there must be distinctions within the divine essence. This would be equally unacceptable to the stringent, Aquinas-style upholder of divine simplicity, since his argument against Palamas must begin with the assertion that distinction implies partitivity. Recall that Cyril of Alexandria wrote long before the life of Palamas that the multiplicity of divine attributes, which are for him no fewer than thousands, means that these attributes cannot be essential.<sup>97</sup>

In any case, it does not seem intuitive or usual for us to think of God's attributes as parts of His essence. Palamas expresses this well when he writes of God, "Being unique, He does not divide Himself... ..and manifests Himself fully by His presence and His action in each of

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<sup>97</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 221. The reason Cyril gives God so many attributes is because he counts every name given to God as an attribute. This is, as far as I can tell, the norm in the ancient Christian world.

these.” We are neither inclined to think nor should we think that God is ‘made up of’ His goodness, mercy, omniscience, etc, like immaterial building blocks. Rather, since God is “unique,” according to Palamas, these are manifestations evident in his *activity*, which is what we witness of Him, just as we truly witness the sun by its rays.

## **V.2: Pure Act**

I will now address another objection from Aquinas’, that from Pure Act. Pure act is the teaching that there is no potentiality at all in God. Aquinas argues that since there is nothing that can move God from potentiality to actuality, God cannot change, and God is totally perfect and therefore neither improvable nor able to diminish in perfection, He is without any potential and is always actualizing all that He can be and do.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Aquinas teaches that God is His essence, leading to the conclusion that the essence of God is this very pure actuality.<sup>99</sup> This is in contrast to Palamas’ teaching that the essence of God is not his activity or that which actualizes Him, for we have already established that for anything that has energies, these energies are integral to actuality. Fortunately, we have good reason to dismiss the teaching of pure actuality outright. If God is and does everything that He can, which is implied by a total lack of potentiality and explicitly upheld by Aquinas, then everything that God does not do is something that He does not have the potential to do, i.e., it is not possible for Him. This is a violation of God’s free will, and even a compatibilist view of the wills of creatures cannot be applied to God, since there are no events beyond Him that can act as impetuses for His own actions, God being the creator of all beyond Himself.

We know that there are certain things that God has not done, such as destroy this particular world in the year 1995. This is not open to dispute; it simply did not occur. Pure act

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<sup>98</sup> Aquinas, 14.

<sup>99</sup> Aquinas, 1, 3, 3.

deprives God of the ability to destroy the world in that year, for were He to have the ability, according to this teaching, He would have done it, since God fulfills every potential of His. He may have any number of reasons for not doing it, but the overwhelming majority of theists, to put it mildly, would agree that God could have, in fact, destroyed the world in 1995.<sup>100</sup> This same problem applies to a seemingly infinite number of things that God could have done, and in light of this, I believe that I can solidly dismiss pure activity as a challenge to Palamas' model of God. One might respond to this with a sort of modal realism in which every possibility according to God's potential is, in fact, realized, and every possible world is created. To this, I point out that by this model, supposing that possible worlds are numbered, God can bring about a) worlds 1, 2, and 3, but not 4, and b) worlds 1, 2, and 4, but not 3. Were he to do both in separate meta-worlds, with each meta-world containing multiple worlds, this process could be repeated ad infinitum regarding the 'levels' or degrees of meta-worlds, and I find this implausible. Taking a different line of attack, it seems definitely unlike God's attributes to create worlds that are possible yet unnecessarily and strongly horrible for their inhabitants, even if this is in His power to do. Therefore, I remain unconvinced of pure act.

### **V.3: Apparently Contradictory Predicates of God**

Someone else might argue that the distinction makes it such that we can make contradictory statements about God. For example, the essence of God, which for Palamas is within God, is totally transcendent, and the energies of God, which are also within God, are imminent, at least to a degree, which makes them not transcendent.<sup>101</sup> This means that it can be said of God that He is both transcendent and imminent. However, we have already established

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<sup>100</sup> Even if there are many theists who do not positively believe this, I am confident that most theists agree that God could do it if He wanted to.

<sup>101</sup> Remember that I am using the word 'within' to denote that the essence and the energies both are none other than our 'outside' of God. By 'within,' I do not mean that either the essence or the energies are parts of God, nor that either of them are composed of parts. What I mean is that neither is less divine than the other.

that imminence is the absence of transcendence and vice versa, so the statement that God is both transcendent and imminent can be simplified to ‘God is transcendent and not transcendent.’ This is a contradiction, which is inadmissible. I, however, respond that this is an error of language rather than a true logical contradiction, and this same error can be made with mundane, non-God things as well as with God. Take, for example, a brick, half of which is painted white and half of which is painted black.<sup>102</sup> White and black are mutually exclusive, so it would normally be a contradiction to say that a brick is both black and white, since this entails that the brick is both black and not-black. However, although this last statement is a contradiction, the brick nevertheless exists before us in our mind’s eye, and we know that it could be real. What, then is the error in our thinking? We attribute the color of one half of the brick to its entirety because it can be rightly said of the brick that it is black, even though less than the entire brick is black. Therefore, even though black and white are mutually exclusive, one thing can be both in this roundabout way.

Now, someone might point out at this juncture that Palamas does not make the essence or the energies parts of God, and this is true. Nevertheless, a similar principle applies. God is imminent because His energies are imminent, and God is transcendent because His essence is transcendent. Neither are energies or essence the only divine, distinct thing, just as the brick is not limited to one of its two halves. The same is true of the relationship between the essence and energies of humans. I can be solving arithmetic sums through my energy of thinking without my essence doing precisely this same thing. Therefore, those who claim that Palamite theology admits contradictions of the sort mentioned here err by applying what is said of one thing to

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<sup>102</sup> Jacobs, Jonathan D. “The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology.” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 6 (2015): 159-175, 163.

another within the same entity. In any case, it is clear that what is said of the energies, being distinct, cannot be said of the essence.

#### **V.4: God’s Knowledge of His Own Essence**

Some might object to the strictness of my stance on the unknowability of God’s essence with the charge that not even God, in my view, can know His own essence.<sup>103</sup> This is because I claimed in Section II that God is transcendent and thusly unknowable not because humans or other creatures lack the requisite intelligence to know God in His essence, but rather, because there is something about the essence of God that puts it beyond our or any creature’s ability to grasp. This, I charge, is because the divine essence has no components or attributes, for attributes, when they are true of God, are His energies, and components are parts, of which we know that God has none. To begin with one of these attributes, namely being, Pseudo-Dionysius writes in the *Divine Names* that God is prior to being and thusly unknowable to us creatures who only know that which has being.<sup>104</sup> Both potentialities and actualities have being as such, and outside of these, we have no experience or concept into which we could fit the divine essence.<sup>105</sup> The situation is akin to that of the proverbial fish who cannot understand dry air. However, it is not as though we could add concepts to our ‘concept-storehouse’ such that the divine essence can be grasped, for it is beyond conceptualization. Pseudo-Dionysius writes, “when, for instance, we give the name of “God” to that transcendent hiddenness, when we call it “life” or “being” or “light” or “Word,” what our minds lay hold of is in fact nothing other than certain activities

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<sup>103</sup> Eklund, Jonas. “Palamism in the Twentieth Century: an Examination of the Essence-Energies Distinction in Vladimir Lossky, Kallistos Ware, and Dumitru Staniloae.” MA thesis, MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2017., 55.

<sup>104</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “Divine Names,” 53.

<sup>105</sup> Packwood, Joshua. “Everything is Flat: the Transcendence of the One in Neoplatonic Ontology.” MA thesis, University of Arkansas, 2013 Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 3551340., 21.

apparent to us,” and this is entirely consistent with Palamas.<sup>106</sup> God, however, is not bound by our experience and concepts, so this limitation on our part, which is not one of quantity,

Secondly, none of the attributes of God are essential even if they are necessary; they are energetic. Therefore, when we think of God’s majesty, wisdom, mercy, goodness, creative power, glory, etc., we are not thinking of His essence. This means that God’s essence cannot be known in the way that a formula or information about something can be known. This is what it means for God’s essence to be empty of knowable content; all divine attributes are without it. The only way to know God’s essence, then, is to directly experience it, which only God does, since He interacts with things outside Himself with the energies, these being His power and activity. In this way, only God can know His essence, and it is impossible for any created thing to know it.

### **V. 5: The Apparent Arising of Being From Non-Being**

Another apparent issue with the Palamite model is the fact that it puts the divine essence beyond being and makes it prior to God’s being, which seemingly entails that being arose from non-being, a statement often considered unacceptable. This sort of view is epitomized by the Chandogya Upanisad, in which it is written:

“Now, on this point, some do say, “In the beginning, this world was simply what is [non-being]— one only, without a second. And from what is [non-being] is born what [has being].” “But son, how can this possibly be?” he continued. “How can what [has being] be born from what is [non-being]? On the contrary, son, in the beginning this world is simply what was [being]— one only, without a second.”<sup>107</sup>

Aristotle also holds a similar view. To such objections, I would reply that according to Palamas’ model, God has always had being, just not essentially. More specifically, God’s essence is always accompanied by His being. In fact, Gregory wrote in the One Hundred and Fifty

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<sup>106</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “Divine Names”, 63.

<sup>107</sup> “Chandogya Upanisad.” In *Upanisads*, 95-176. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996., 149.

Chapters that God did not come into being from non-being.<sup>108</sup> This is because God's being is an energy of God and has thusly always existed, albeit in a state of non-temporal posteriority to God's essence. For reasons already described, God's energies must always accompany His essence. David Bentley Hart even argues that this same being is that which underlies created things, such as the world.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, in his view, which is harmonious with Palamas', your being and mine did not arise from non-being in a past time, satisfying those who are rightfully concerned about such a case. Being is for him an energy of God in which we, knowingly or not, participate. If this were not the case, then God would be severed from knowability. This is comparable to Palamas' view that the divine energies create and keep order in the world and that the glory of God, an energy, is able to participated in through God's grace by humans.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, objectors of this sort have nothing to fear.

#### **V.6: Necessity and Essentiality**

My response to this objection concerning God's being, however, might provoke another objection. If God's energies are attributes of God that we claim must be true of God in order for Him to truly be God, then it appears that they are essential, since their removal implies a change in identity. To begin with, some attributes that we say must be true of God, like Creator or Benefactor, we deduce would be true of a God were He to exist in light of the fact that this world is real, although since this world's reality is contingent, these attributes can be excused from this question of apparently essential attributes.<sup>111</sup> But many still remain to be dealt with, such as Good, Omnipotent, Omniscient, and the like. We have already seen arguments in Section IV for

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<sup>108</sup> Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 103.

<sup>109</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 131.

<sup>110</sup> Lossky, 70.

<sup>111</sup> In this way, they might be called accidents, since their absence would not compromise God's God-ness except under the condition that creation is real. However, unlike most accidents, they do not come and go from God, since God does not change.

the distinctness of God's energies from His essence, including Palamas' one from divine simplicity. It is helpful here to recall what is perhaps Thomas Aquinas' strongest argument for divine simplicity, namely, that from efficient cause. There is nothing that could unite God's attributes or parts into His essence were they essential, for God Himself could not assemble His own essence. A partitive essence of God would also entail that His parts be prior to the essence that they make up, something that is also unacceptable. For these reasons alone and in light of the fact that we have already demonstrated the distinctness of God's energies from one another, I believe that we should abandon the idea that God's attributes are essential.

However, there are other good reasons to reject this idea. If it were essential of a human to reason, remember, see, hear, taste, feel, smell, locomote of his own accord, pump blood, feel emotion, and be conscious of himself, then the removal of any one of these would mean a cessation of humanity, but this seems not only counterintuitive but also repugnant because of its moral implications. On the other hand, were we to claim that because none of these are essential, something could be a human and possess *none* of these in any degree at any time, then our claim would also be dubious, for it is difficult to imagine something that has none of these at all being a human. This dilemma begins to open up some space between essence and accident for necessary but not essential properties.

In his essay, "Essence and Modality," Kit Fine provides several arguments for both the possibility and reality of such necessary but not essential properties. One is that is necessarily true that if a person *x* is real, then he is a member of a set consisting only of real people who are *x*. The apodosis of this statement, however, is not essential to *x*, even though it is logically required by his reality.<sup>112</sup> It is also true that truths that are necessary independently of the reality

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<sup>112</sup> Fine, Kit. "Essence and Modality: the Second Philosophical Perspectives Lecture." *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994): 1-16., 4-5.

of a person  $x$  are necessarily true if  $x$  is real, but it is even more clear that these truths are not essential to  $x$ .<sup>113</sup> Furthermore,  $x$  necessitates  $x$ 's parents, but his parents are not essential to him.<sup>114</sup> The divine attributes are comparable to  $x$ 's parents in this last argument. Indeed, their absence would indicate an absence of God, just as  $x$  would not be without his parents. Nevertheless, they are not essential to God, just as  $x$ 's parents are not essential to  $x$ .

Palamas seems to hold a view of the relationship between the essence and the energies as one akin to that of smoke and fire. Where there is smoke, there is fire, and, if we imagine for a moment that there are no smokeless fires, the absence of smoke indicates the absence of fire. Similarly, the absence of God's attributes would indicate the absence of God's essence to the same degree that their presence indicates His essence's presence.

#### **V.7: God as a Bundle of Energies**

Again, the solution to one objection leads to the arising of another objection. For if all that we experience of God is His energies, can we have a good reason to believe that the essence is there at all? Might God just be a bundle of distinct energies? Such a model would remove any need for the essence-energies distinction to begin with, but it cannot be the case. Firstly, energies must be the energies of something. God's energies are not like servants with their own selves or souls, operating on behalf of the divine essence; this would be equivalent to introducing multiple Gods. Rather, like seeing to the eye, all energies must be *of* something. No activity can be an activity without a bearer of the activity, so to speak, even if it is distinct from the bearer's essence. This also holds for the sense of the word in which energy is a potential for activity or a power; a potential or power is of something. The capacity to act is the capacity of the actor, and the same is true for God.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 6. This essay is an excellent defense of necessary, non-essential properties, and I would recommend it to those interested in learning more about them.

Also, since we know that the energies are distinct from each other, the same arguments that lead us to accept divine simplicity bar us from accepting this model. Were God a bundle of energies, then this bundle would contain multiple energies and therefore no simplicity. Palamas is able to teach that each energy does not manifest a part or portion of God because God is not partitive, but if the energies are not manifestations or activities, but rather the entirety of a non-essential God, then their distinctiveness undermines divine simplicity. A part of God would be His will, another part His creative power, etc., with nothing to unite them together other than the bundle itself. But what is the bundle without the energies that make it up? Bundle theorists of human identity can claim that the consistent interaction of the parts of the bundle with each other unite them, but the energies of God consistently interact with creation, which is clearly not included in God. Bundle theorists of human identity can also claim that observers of the various evident activities of humans can mentally unite them into a single bundle, but if for God, the divine mind does this, then it could just as easily include creation in God. If it is non-divine observers who serve this role, then God would not exist until observed by His own creation! Therefore, we can say confidently that God is not a bundle of energies.

#### **V.8: Whether There is a Single Element that Pervades Everything**

Lastly, I will address the question opened up by the utter transcendence of God, namely, whether there is any single element that pervades everything. This cannot be being, for the essence of God does not have being except insofar as one of its energies is God's being. Being, however, is not a part of the essence nor something that the essence 'sits on' the way the essences of created things do. Although the divine essence exists, we have already established that existence is not separate from that which exists in the terms of this essay, in contrast with

being, which is separate from that which has it.<sup>115</sup> Is there anything, then, that we can say pervades *everything* in light of the fact that the divine essence is totally transcendent. I propose that it is God, considering that neither God's essence nor His energies are beyond Him, as we have established here. Furthermore, if we hold with Gregory Palamas and David Bentley Hart that God's being is participated in by all of creation, then God is everywhere and in everything.<sup>116</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

And this proposition is largely what drove Palamas to write his work. He was not a systematic theologian, but rather, one dealing with issues as they arose, yet he has left us with a detailed model of God that allows God to be so present in the world and in our minds. This is not to the detriment of divine transcendence, however, which was taken for granted, though I defend it here, by both Palamas and his opponents, including Barlaam. They drew from the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition of total transcendence, as have I. I argue that God is such that He cannot sit on any conceptual or metaphysical ground beyond His own self, and for this reason, His essence is unknowable. I also argue that it is an unacceptable diminution of God's power for God to be limited in power in any way, and this means that He must be without any 'poverty of particularity,' that is, God must not be bound by any constraints imposed by the laws of logic or natures. Being beyond logic and unlimited in power, God's essence is unknowable.

God, however, also must be imminent for several reasons. For one, having created the world, He has established a knowable and undeniable relationship with it, giving God a certain, definite role in the world, one that is understood differently by different people but is accepted

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<sup>115</sup> Hart, *The Experience of God*, 30.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, and Palamas, *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 39.

by both theists and deists.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps more pressingly, human claims to knowledge about and experience of God rely on divine imminence, for a totally transcendent but not imminent God cannot be known at all in either sense of the word. However, it appears that transcendence is exclusive of imminence and vice versa, so our well-grounded claims about God are in an apparent contradiction.

This apparent contradiction is solved by the essence-energies distinction argued for by Gregory Palamas. The distinction holds that there is a real distinction between the essence of God and the energies of God such that the essence of God, which is prior to the energies, is totally transcendent in the manner described above, but the energies are imminent and knowable, being the presence of God in the world and themselves not prior to all else, since they are posterior to the essence. Knowledge of the energies, however, constitutes genuine knowledge of God because the energies are God, though not parts of God. Both the essence and the energies should be considered within God without being equated with each other, just as we should neither consider our souls or energies separate from us nor confuse them with each other. Accordingly with this fairly obvious observation about human beings, the same should be said of God. Palamas and myself give various arguments to support this, including ones against Thomistic objections from divine simplicity and the teaching of pure act. The most prevalent of these in Gregory's works may be the argument from the multiplicity of energies, which, if the energies were considered parts of the essence, would lead us to conclude either that God's essence is partitive or that that two things which are clearly distinct and are in fact identical. Nevertheless, I find the most convincing argument in favor of the distinction to be the fact that is

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<sup>117</sup> I call this relationship undeniable not because no one can deny its reality on the grounds that God does not exist, but rather, because even those who deny the existence of God generally hold that were God to exist, He would have a role in the world, even if only as a causal agent.

reconciles transcendence and imminence in a logically consistent fashion without compromising one in favor of the other, something that I have not found in other models of God.

For this reason, I believe that Gregory Palamas' work has been underappreciated in the field of philosophy. It seems to be thought of as of a mostly religious nature and therefore of interest only to Eastern Orthodox Christians or their theological opponents in other churches. I suspect that this is partially because he is celebrated among Orthodox Christians as a defender of the faith rather than an innovator, showing him in a different light than Aquinas or William of Ockham, who are often called philosophers and studied alongside non-overtly-Christian philosophers, are often shown in. His work is furthermore, unlike some of his Western counterparts, not systematic and was written in response to a conflict that arose over practices within the Church, rather than over purely intellectual or theoretical matters. I could write much on how these reasons reflect large-scale differences between the Christian East and West, but to do such would be tangential to the purpose of this essay, which is to advance Palamas' distinction in particular as a viable model of God for contemporary philosophical discourse, and I believe that I have advanced it as such.

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