

The Difficulty of the Divided and Undivided God
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Abstract: I argue that the difficulty of the essence and energies distinction in ecumenical discussions between Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians can be reconciled. This can be achieved through the adoption of the formal distinction from the Scotist school of thought, as has been proposed by Patriarch Gennadios Scholarios. I also argue that the Roman Catholic Church is not strictly bound to the Thomist school of thought but legitimately permits such use of the work of Blessed Duns Scotus.

When reading some of the great works by revered authors throughout the ages, one occasionally discovers perplexing phrases, such as the God “beyond being,”¹ who is said to be “not a thing”² in the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius. One may find even more enigmatic phrases, such as the God who is “divided in an undivided way”³ in the writings of St. Gregory Palamas. Without a clear understanding of the way in which the author defines their terms, one may easily misunderstand their meaning and import their own definition into the text. This would naturally lead to serious confusion and would deprive the reader of the proper understanding the author intended for the reader. Perhaps this is why the notion that God is a divided and yet undivided being is especially perplexing to those in the Roman Catholic Church who wish to understand why Eastern Orthodox employ such language but are unfamiliar with the way St. Gregory Palamas defines his terminology. For this reason, it is imperative to explain why St. Gregory feels this distinction is legitimate, how he defines his terms and then note possible ways in which the meaning of the terms may be reconciled with the Roman Catholic tradition.

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, Luibhéid Colm, and Paul Rorem, 1987, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press) 49.

² *Ibid.*, 54.

³ Gregory Palamas, R. Ferwerda, and Sara J. Denning-Bolle, 1999, *Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite*. Medieval Studies Worldwide. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Global Publications/CEMERS), 84.

In the Old Testament, we learn that Moses spoke to God “face to face.”⁴ Yet, we also discover that nobody can see God’s face and live.⁵ Is there a contradiction here, or is there a special distinction between the sense in which God can be seen and the sense in which He cannot? In order to answer this question, it is important to consult the Eastern distinction between the essence and energies of God, which was formulated in the writings of the Cappadocians⁶ and found its apex in the writings of St. Gregory Palamas.

By essence, Palamas does not necessarily mean “God’s being,”⁷ which is how St. Thomas Aquinas tends to use the term, but means “what is imparticipable in God.”⁸ By energies the saint means the “ways in which God reveals Himself and can be participated and named.”⁹ One might ask, does this not create composition within God? Surely one must deny any conclusion of the sort, as St. Thomas demonstrates there can be no composition within God.¹⁰ St. Gregory, knowing the reasons why one must deny composition within God, vehemently denies the charge that the essence and energies distinction makes God a compound, as he states, “He

⁴ Ex. 33:11, RSV, Second Catholic edition.

⁵ Ex. 33:20.

⁶ See St. Basil *Letter 234*, where he notes the difference between essence and energies (operations).

⁷ Mark K. Spencer 2017. “The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2): 123–39.

⁸ Spencer, *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 3, 1-8.

alone is not only genuinely simple, but also simplicity itself.”¹¹ He also states “[e]ssence and energy are thus not totally identical in God, even though He is entirely manifest in every energy, His essence being indivisible”.¹² In other words, essence and energies are distinct, yet they are inseparable. Some may still object and say this is a contradiction. St. Gregory anticipates this objection and notes how some fathers said that the essence and energies are one and yet distinct. He replies “[t]hey call them one, but not indifferent, i.e., the same and not the same in different manners.”¹³ One might agree the fathers said such things, but still may ask how such a distinction be reconciled. At this point, St. Gregory does not appear to offer a definitive solution. He does present numerous qualifications and distinctions, but one may still ask for a more definitive solution than what he seems to offer in his corpus.

This is where the solution of the formal distinction, introduced by Blessed Duns Scotus, seems promising. The formal distinction is defined as “a distinction between a thing and its formality or between formalities of a thing.”¹⁴ What, one may ask, is a “formality?” In this context, it refers to “intelligible contents”¹⁵ of a thing. For instance, one can distinguish between the two formalities of intellect and will in a human person, prior to the mind’s act of cognition. However, one cannot divide or separate them so as to say an intellect can subsist in a being

¹¹ Palamas, Ferwerda, Denning-Bolle, *Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite*, 90.

¹² Gregory Palamas, and John Meyendorff. 1983. *The Triads*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press), 95.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁴ Bernard J. Wuellner, 1956, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Bruce Pub), 36.

¹⁵ Spencer, III.

without a will. This kind of distinction provides enough room to differentiate between two intelligible contents or formalities in a being, yet not to the extent that they become divided. Likewise, it prevents one from conflating the two concepts as isomorphically identical, as nobody would want to say that intellect and will are coextensively identical. When properly employed and qualified, the same distinction allows one to distinguish between God's essence and energies, as well as the ability to distinguish between the various energies themselves, without resorting to a composite deity and without relegating the two concepts to a merely nomination, or even virtual, distinction.

Is this a novel use of the work of Blessed Duns Scotus in order to reconcile Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theology on the essence and energies distinction? Hardly, as many have noted the historical use of the formal distinction as a building bridge between these two traditions. For example. Fr. Christian Kappes notes "Scholarios' solution was to 'reform' Thomism by introducing it to 'the formal distinction.'" ¹⁶ In other words, he shows how the astute 15th century Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople was able to reform the Thomist position by adopting the Scotist formal distinction and reconcile it with the Palamite distinction between essence and energies.

Some may ask how the Thomist system can be repaired and reconciled with the Palamite school of thought, as the former usually adheres to the virtual distinction, rather than the formal distinction? Quite simply, there is nothing in Thomistic metaphysics that excludes the use of the

¹⁶ Christian Kappes, *The Essence/Energies Distinction in the Theology of St Gennadius Scholarios*, available online <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2016/10/18/the-essenceenergies-distinction-in-the-theology-of-st-gennadius-scholarios/>, accessed 8 September, 2019.

formal distinction. This has been demonstrated in great detail by very capable and informed scholars.¹⁷

What about Catholic dogma? Has not the Roman Catholic Church dogmatized Thomism, thereby precluding any contributions from the Scotist school of thought? It should be noted there is nothing in Catholic dogma that excludes the use of the formal distinction from Scotistic metaphysics. In fact, the Scotist school of thought is permitted in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Catholic Encyclopedia accurately demonstrates this, as it notes:

In their Decrees Leo XIII and Pius X have recommended not alone St. Thomas, but also Scholasticism in general, and this includes also the Scotist School. In 1897 Leo XIII approved the "Constitutiones Generales Fratrum Minorum", of which article 245 prescribes for the members of the order: "In doctrinis philosophicis et theologicis antiquae scholae Franciscanae inhaerere studeant, quin tamen ceteros scholasticos negligant" (In philosophical and theological doctrine they shall take care to follow the ancient Franciscan School, without, however, neglecting the other Schoolmen.)¹⁸

As has been noted, the concept of the divided, yet undivided God, Whose essence is distinct from His energies, and Who can be seen and yet not seen, is *prima facie* a troubling and seemingly contradictory concept. When one discovers the distinction, one may be concerned it creates difficulties with God's simplicity. Further concerns relate to how the distinction can be reconciled with Thomism and even Roman Catholic dogma. However, when one legitimately employs the formal distinction from the Scotist school

¹⁷See the previously cited work by Mark K. Spencer.

¹⁸ Parthenius Mingos, "Scotism and Scotists." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912) online edition: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13610b.htm>, accessed 8 September 2019.

of thought, the difficulties minimize and a bridge between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy is established.

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