Gregory Palamas at the Council of Blachernae, 1351

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

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

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

2 This, in the main, is the view of Roman Catholic scholarship on the subject. See M. Jugie, "Palamas, Grégoire," in Dictionnaire de théologie catholique XI.2 (1932) cols.1735–76, and P. S. Guichardan, Le problème de la simplicité divine en Orient et en Occident aux xiv* et xv* siècles: Grégoire Palamas, Duns Scot, Georges Scholarios (Lyons 1933). The latter examines the problem from the view of Thomist philosophy. See the review of this work by V. Grumel,
to western readers—by showing the true meaning and traditional character of Palamas’ formulation—than Fr Jean Meyendorff.\(^3\)

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

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

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\(^4\) The historian should note that this official approval had for Byzantium both a cultural and theological importance, inasmuch as it was, in the main, a victory for the conservative Greek tradition that opposed both western culture and the Roman Church. 1351 marked a change in attitude from the strong Latin influence that had obtained in Byzantium in the preceding two centuries. See G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford 1968) 522f. For details on the Council of 1351, cf. Meyendorff, *op.cit.* (supra n.3) 366.
bishops and several proxies. It included of course the anti-Palamite faction, which was permitted to give its views, but which was unable to procure from the synod the condemnation of Palamas.

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

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

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5 Encomium Philotheo, PG 151, col.621D.
6 Tomus Synodicus, PG 151, col.723B: ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ὁμολογίας ἀκρίβεια διὰ πάντων τηρεῖται καὶ ζητεῖται. See also Papamichael, op.cit. (supra n.3) 136.
7 PG 151, col.723c.
8 I know of no other translation from the Greek except a German attempt in Wort und Mysterium (Witten 1958) 220–24 (a collection of Orthodox theological works in German translation). The original, however, is to be found in Ms Paris. Gr. 1351A, fol.350 (cf. Meyendorff, op.cit. [supra n.3] 365), and in the following editions: I. Karmiris, ed., Τὰ δογματικὰ καὶ συμβολικὰ μνημεία τῆς Ὑπαρχούσης Καθολικὴς Ἐκκλησίας Α΄ (Athens 1952) 343–46. My translation is from this edition, a far more competent work than the older edition by Fr F. Combeis, Bibliothecae graecorum patrum auctarium novissimum II (Paris 1672) 172–76, which is reproduced in PG 151, cols.763–68. There is also the edition in Dosithaeus of Jerusalem, Τόμος ἐγάπης (Jassy 1698) 85–88.
9 So Christou, op.cit. (supra n.3) col.785, and Meyendorff, op.cit. (supra n.3) 365.
10 Meyendorff, op.cit. (supra n.3) 366.
Confessions—formal statements of doctrines made by an individual or individuals—are as old as Christianity itself.\textsuperscript{11} It is generally agreed that the difference between a 'confession' and a 'creed' is that a creed is almost always briefer and less comprehensive than the long and more systematic exposition of faith of a confession.\textsuperscript{12} Such certainly is the case with the solemn Conﬂession made by Palamas in 1351. Interestingly enough, however, the exposition follows in outline the celebrated Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed and in fact ends in almost identical fashion with the words, "we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting of the world to come."

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

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. I Tim. 6.13; II Cor. 9.13.

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

Here follows a complete translation of the Confession.

**The Orthodox Confession of Faith set Forth by the**
**Most Reverend Metropolitan of Thessalonica,**
**Lord Gregory Palamas**

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

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

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


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

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

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

23 John 14.16.
25 ἀλλὰ μετὰ τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν.
because it possesses a power or powers; because of this, it can never be said that potentiality is properly composite. Moreover, we venerate relatively (referring this veneration to the original) the holy image of the representation of the Son of God, who was incarnate for us. Similarly, we venerate the honorable wood of the cross and all the symbols of his passion as being truly the divine trophies against the common enemy of our race; we venerate the saving image \( \tau \rho \omicron \nu \omicron \] of the venerable cross, the holy churches and locations, the sacred utensils and the words divinely handed down, inasmuch as God dwells in them. We also venerate the images of all the saints in recognition of our love for them and for God, whom they truly loved and worshipped; in this act of veneration we direct our thoughts to the representations of the images. We venerate the very relics of the saints since the sanctifying grace does not vanish from their most holy bones, just as the Godhead was not divided from the Lord’s body during the three-day death.

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

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

\[ \text{Phil. 2.6.} \]
Council of the 318 God-inspired fathers meeting in Nicaea against the rebellious Arius, who impiously reduced the Son of God to a creature and separated the Godhead—worshipped in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—into created and uncreated; the Council subsequent to this of the 150 holy fathers, meeting in Constantinople against Macedonius of Constantinople, who impiously reduced the Holy Spirit into a creature and separated no less impiously the one Godhead into created and uncreated; the Council of the 200 fathers meeting in Ephesus against Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, who rejected the hypostatic union in Christ, of his divinity and humanity, and who in no way would consent to call the Virgin who truly bore God ‘Theotokos’; and the fourth Council of the 630 fathers meeting in Chalcedon against Eutyches and Dioscorus, who erroneously taught as doctrine one nature in Christ; and the Council following, of the 165 fathers meeting in Constantinople against Theodorus and Diodorus, who held identical views with Nestorius, and recommended the latter’s teaching through their writings; [this Council also met] against Origen, Didymus and a certain Evagrius (of an older generation), who endeavored to introduce certain mythical doctrines into the Church of God; and the Council following of the 170 fathers meeting in the same city against Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, who presided in Constantinople, and who rejected the two energies and two wills appropriate to the two natures of Christ; and the Council of the 367 fathers meeting once more in Nicaea against the Iconoclasts.

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

28 Palamas is here referring to the Council of 1341 and that of 1351 held in Constantinople. These Councils, although not ecumenical, possess doctrinal authority; their decisions are as valid as those of the Seven Ecumenical Councils (mentioned in the preceding paragraph by Palamas), since they were ultimately accepted by the entire eastern Church. Cf. T. Ware, The Orthodox Church (Baltimore 1968) 210f, and Sir Steven Runciman, The Great Church in Captivity (Cambridge 1968) 23.
mountain,—and simply every power and operation of the Three Persons of the Godhead, and everything that differs from the divine nature in any way whatever, is created; and they too impiously separate the one Godhead into created and uncreated. And they label as atheists and polytheists (just as Jews, Sabellians and Arians believe of us), those who piously believe that the most sacred light is uncreated and every power and operation is divine—since nothing which issues naturally from God is created. But we properly cast out both the latter and the former as atheists and polytheists and totally excommunicate them from the company of the faithful, as the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ did through the Synodal Tome and the Hagioretic Tome. We believe in one omnipotent Godhead in three hypostases, whose unity and simplicity are in no way lost on account of either the powers or the hypostases. Moreover, we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting of the world to come. AMEN.

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