



Constantinos Athanasopoulos\*

*Metropolitan Amfilohije's views on St Gregory Palamas and  
Orthodoxy: A Return to Palamism*

*Introduction: Why Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and Litoral?*

In my examination of the work of Metropolitan Amfilohije on St Gregory Palamas and Orthodoxy, I would like to highlight the cultural aspects of his message for the Orthodox of today, both in terms of the theological aspects of this message and in terms of the philosophical consequences this message entails for researchers into Palamas' work and legacy today.

But before we even investigate the main topic of our discussion here one could ask: why Palamists of today should focus on Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and Litoral? An obvious answer is that he was one of the most dedicated followers of Palamas in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout his life, but more evidently from his defence of his PhD at the Faculty of Theology in Athens on June 17, 1973, till his last few days as a Metropolitan of Montenegro and Litoral, he showed how a Palamist can think, work, and live today amidst the rapidly changing cultural, social, and political conditions of our age. This is by no accident. He was a spiritual son and a student of one of the most famous and important contemporary followers of Palamas: St Justin of Ćelije (Popović, 1894-1979), who translated into Serbian many works of the Fathers of Philokalia. According to Metropolitan Amfilohije himself, St Justin was his spiritual father and St Justin was the one who introduced him to the Church Fathers and the Theology of St Gregory Palamas.<sup>1</sup>

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\*The Open University, UK (c.athanasopoulos@open.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Ράντοβιτς, *Το μυστήριο της Αγίας Τριάδος*, 9.

St Justin, was a theologian and a philosopher of high calibre: he was a student and spiritual son of Saint Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956) and, with the advice of his spiritual father, he studied for his PhD on “The Philosophy and Religion of F.M. Dostoevsky” at the Theological School of the University of Oxford, but he was not awarded the degree due to disagreement with the examining committee there; he published his thesis on Dostoevsky at the Orthodox journal *The Christian Life*, in which he became the Editor in 1923. In 1926, he submitted a PhD thesis at the University of Athens with the title: “The Problem of Personality and Cognition According to St. Macarius of Egypt” gaining his PhD in Theology from Athens at the same year. In 1934, he became Professor of Dogmatics at the Theological Faculty of St. Sava in Belgrade. As a professor at the University of Belgrade he was one of the founders (1938) of the Serbian Philosophical Society influencing several Serb intellectuals. During his life he translated several works from the Fathers of *Philokalia* and the Kollyvades Fathers, such as a selection from *The Lives of the Saints* of St Nikodemos the Hagiorite, and texts from St Isaac the Syrian, St Macarius of Egypt, and others.

*Metropolitan Amfilohije's PhD: The Mystery of the Holy Trinity  
according to St Gregory Palamas*

Even though the details of the argument of Metropolitan Amfilohije's PhD can be found in the main body of his PhD (primarily in the First Chapter and more exegetically in the Second and Third Chapters), what he claims at the Dedication, the Prologue, and the Introduction, are very important for an understanding of the cultural setting of his work and his overall approach to today's problems. At the dedication page he dedicates this work to the “New Martyrs of this time, who give beautiful incense and pure sacrifice by offering themselves to the Holy Trinity”. This is a significant dedication, not only because of the time that the PhD was written (Eastern Europe was under the Soviet Russia's power and the Communists in Eastern Europe were persecuting free thinking Orthodox, who frequently found themselves in prison and/or being executed or sent to the harsh conditions of exile for their beliefs). It also shows Metropolitan Amfilohije's belief that for one to live the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the sense that was revealed by St Greg-

ory Palamas, one must be a New Martyr. There is no escape from the Truth that the mystery of the Triune God entails and the courage one must show to face this Truth and live with this Truth (this will become more evident in his thesis later).

In the Prologue, he starts with a very important claim: St Gregory Palamas is more contemporary and relevant to us today than to the people of his time. He believes that what one can get as an overall message from Palamas and his work is that the “time of the Fathers” does not end with St John Damascene (as many contemporary theologians and philosophers claim, primarily in the West); he believes that Orthodoxy must realise fully its historical continuity, which did not stop at any time in its history.<sup>2</sup> This, as the Metropolitan recognises, goes against many (historians, Byzantinists, Theologians, Philosophers and Cultural Theorists) in the West, who consider that there was some kind of stop in the continuity of the “time of the Fathers” during the later Byzantine era and especially during the Turkish Ottoman invasion. The Metropolitan finds that this view has also been propagandised by “some of the Orthodox” theologians and historians who studied abroad and/or became childishly fascinated with the eruditions of the Western scholars. The Metropolitan claims that the Orthodox Church, fully conscious of its heritage, provides witness for this continuation of the “time of the Fathers” through its worship and the continuing appearance of Saints. For the Metropolitan, “all Saints are Fathers of the Church”. Fully realising this, all times of the Orthodox Church are “times of the Fathers”. According to the Metropolitan, St Gregory Palamas is one of the most representative Fathers of the Church, who can provide to us evidence for this continuity. For him, the importance of St Gregory Palamas for us today is due to the way his works can be applied to the contemporary cultural, philosophical, and theological problems that all “seriously thinking contemporary people” recognise them as such. Contemporary thinkers are fascinated by two key characteristics in the Philosophy and Theology of St Gregory Palamas: Palamas’ insistence on the incomprehensibility of the mystery of divine Being and Palamas’ mystical empiricism (as a method of approaching this mystery). The Metropolitan finds that Palamas is “existentially” attractive to contemporary thinking people for one more reason: frequent ecumenical discussions with other faiths mean that contemporary Orthodox are interested in the way the Saints are treating (doctrinal) truth and in the way the Saints behave

<sup>2</sup> Πάντοβιτς, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος*, 7.

towards those who call themselves “Christians”, but who do not belong to the wholesome Church of Christ. Palamas here inspires them, because he is far from all theological minimalism and shows most vividly not only that truth resides only in those who belong to the true Church of Christ, but also that no truth can be found outside this Church.<sup>3</sup>

In the Introduction of his published PhD thesis, the Metropolitan starts with an aphorism: “The inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery of the Holy Trinity is the foundation of Christian Faith and its only source. From this mystery stems forth all truth of the Church of God and to this mystery it returns”.<sup>4</sup> So, from the start of his Introduction we see the Metropolitan emphasizing the mystical nature of what he is going to describe later on and, in this way, he confirms from the start the “mystical empiricism” approach that he finds in Palamas. He finds that this mystical empirical approach can be found in the New Testament, and it is preserved in the Orthodox Church through its teachings, the blood of the martyrs and the definitions of Orthodox Dogma. He cites St Justin’s insistence that the struggle of the Fathers in keeping the faith uncontaminated by heresies focused on combating the Judaistic type of monotheism, national monism, and panentheism or pantheism, which are the sources of all heresies regarding the Holy Trinity. In the rest of his Introduction, he elaborates on the main heresies regarding the Holy Trinity prior to the age of St Gregory Palamas and isolates the roots of the heresies of Varlaam of Calabria and his followers (Akindynos and Gregoras) in their embrace of Byzantine humanism and Neo-platonism, which was predominant in the later Byzantine circles of learned scholars at the University of Constantinople. This embrace with foreign to the Orthodox Church cultural paradigms, made them either surrender themselves to Judaistic monotheism or to a Thomistic and overall Latin scholastic Triadology, which made it impossible for them to accept St Gregory Palamas’ views on divine energies and the way Saints can have a direct experience of the Triune God through them. He finds that these two standpoints (Humanism to the point of a humanistic materialism and Neo-platonism -at least of the brand that was circulating in late Byzantine era) are the two predominant philosophical and cultural

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<sup>3</sup> There is an explicit reference here to the Critical Edition of the *Collected Works of Palamas*, by P. Christou, vol. 2, 627.

<sup>4</sup> Πάντοβιτς, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος*, 15.

standpoints that oppose the Orthodox mindset and the Orthodox way of life. As the Metropolitan insists, Humanism leads, inescapably, to materialism and Neo-platonism leads to an “abstract” God; such a God is an approximation to a “dead” God, and this “abstract” God is in essence a “forerunner” of such a God.<sup>5</sup> In a footnote, he elaborates that these two heretical standpoints exist even now in the Orthodox Church and lead many astray, and for this reason the writings of St Gregory Palamas are of extreme importance today more than ever.<sup>6</sup> The Metropolitan finds that today, more than ever, humans have locked themselves through this humanistic materialism within their senses looking at themselves through their naturalistic and empiricist lenses as through a fragmented mirror. Science cannot help humans here, because it has made humans disappear in the immense nature of cosmos. Scientific studies of the limitations of human rationality and the tragic nature of human free will as well as the predominance of the demonic irrationality of pleasure make even more difficult for contemporary humans to find their true wholesome selves. St Gregory Palamas appears here as a certain and safe guide for the empirical purification and wholesomeness of human existence, which is completed only through the participation in the triadic glory of the body of Christ and through it in the fulfilment of Triune God, who is fulfilling all in all. So, the teachings of St Gregory Palamas on the mystery of the Triune God is transformed from a theoretical endeavour and investigation into an urgent message of life and human salvation. Keeping Palamas’ teachings at the theoretical level (as an elaborate theoretical system) would be a betrayal of Palamas, both in terms of his life and his thinking on this mystery. It is in this sense (according to the Metropolitan) that we can understand the comment of Patriarch Philotheos (in his *Oration for St Gregory Palamas*, Oration 41), that Palamas’ theology on God’s existence, divine epiphany, and the relationship of God with creation is “in some sense a *συμπέρασμα* [conclusion] and *ανάπτυξις* [development]” of all patristic theology that comes before Palamas. One can see here the Metropolitan’s conviction that Palamism is not and cannot be limited only to a theoretical way of understanding Palamas’ work but must include a practical engagement with the experience that Palamas insists upon. *Συμπέρασμα* and *ανάπτυξις* without the practical engagement seems quite alien to the true

<sup>5</sup> Ράντοβιτς, *Το μυστήριον της Αγίας Τριάδος*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ράντοβιτς, *Το μυστήριον της Αγίας Τριάδος*, 25-26.

spirit of Palamism that the Metropolitan tried to portray most vividly with his work and life.

According to the Metropolitan, there is a lived consciousness in Palamas that the existential cry “*φώτισόν μου το σκότος* [enlighten my darkness]” is the very thirst for the “*αγνώστου γνώσεως* [unknown knowledge]”. In this, there is the mystical experience of the truth that when a human comes to know God, the human can only know Him as a (personal) being that is infinitely remote to human nature. The mystery of Triune’s divine supra-essentiality and unity, cannot be thought without the perfection and distinctness of the three persons of God. The Triune mystery is not only unexplorable, but also cannot be named, as being above names, above knowledge and above any kind of theory and vision (borrowing here terms from the Areopagitic texts). One cannot name the Triadic mystery, because there is no comparison or comparable analogy [*λόγος*] in human soul, no word by human language to express it, and its comprehension either by the senses or by the mind is always impossible. The Metropolitan here insists that Palamas’ term “*τελειοτάτη ακαταληψία* [perfect incomprehensibility]” is not here implicating agnosticism or an absolute negation of the possibility of knowledge of God. There is in Palamas’ work reference to what can be known of God (“*το του Θεού γνωστόν*”), i.e., that God exists, that He is One (i.e., one divinity), and that He is Three Persons (Triune God).<sup>7</sup> But this knowledge, as Metropolitan insists, is not dependent on human rationality and logic, but is being taught by the Holy Spirit to the Saints. The faith that leads us here has no need of a proof, and faith cannot be proven through physical data. It depends on the revelation of the mysteries by the Holy Spirit to the faithful’s heart.<sup>8</sup>

Here we see the Metropolitan’s belief that Palamas’ insistence on discussing the apodeictic method is not so much based on Palamas’ faith in the validity of the apodeictic syllogism as such, but accepts as its presupposition the real experience of God (by the Saints).<sup>9</sup> So, the Metropolitan concludes that both the apophatic and the cataphatic ways in St Gregory’s work have foundations on what is provided through mystical experience, and that the apophatic way is not only a thought process and function, but, following here the Areopagitic

<sup>7</sup> The Metropolitan here refers to the following works of Palamas: *Θεοράνης* 17, *Χρήστου επιμ., Συγγρ. Β*, p.242; *Επιστ. Α προς Ακίνδυνον* 8, *Χρήστου επιμ., Συγγρ. Α*, p.212.

<sup>8</sup> *Επιστ. Α προς Ακίνδυνον* 10, *Χρήστου επιμ., Συγγρ. Α*, p.214.

<sup>9</sup> See Ράντοβιτς, *Το μυστήριον της Αγίας Τριάδος*, footnote in p. 32.

texts, it is a *catharsis*, i.e., refusing to accept the created as it is, because it implicates the divine non-existence. It is a negation in the realm of the created to compare the created to the uncreated, it is a liberation of some kind, driving the whole being of a human, who thirsts for the knowledge of God. The Metropolitan cites a series of passages from the Triads (Υπέρ των Ιερώς Ησυχάζόντων 2, 3, 26; 32; 53) to support this interpretation of Palamas: that St Gregory Palamas accepts abstraction doing theology through abstraction, but St Gregory would not accept abstraction without faith. As both *apophasis* and *cataphasis* need faith, so does abstraction from both. This means that faith leads one to experience, which is above all logical *cataphasis*, and which is received as a gift. Abstraction is “received”, through this experience and through it a vision comes that reveals the infinite incomprehension of divine Being. These modes of knowledge of God (*cataphasis*, *apophasis*, abstraction [αφαίρεσις]) do not deny the nature of the mystery of God: God is known through experience, while at the same time remaining inexpressible, becomes comprehended, but remains incomprehensible, is theorised, but He is above any theory. Negation of creation and any possible abstraction from it, to be able to approach God is necessary, but, because it depends on the knowledge of nature, it is also relative. For this reason, all worldly and philosophical knowledge (including cataphatic and apophatic) can only be relative. The real experience of the inexpressible mystery is possible only when a human goes beyond all human intellectual energy and enters to a union with God that goes beyond all powers and abilities of the human mind. This union may originate in an abstraction as a logical process, but it is completed through the “visible theophany”, i.e., through the participation in the divine light. Such a union cannot be found in any other created beings, and it is beyond any created being, because it does not belong to the order of created things. For St Gregory, humans, through faith and healing of the mind, can start this process using *cataphasis* and *apophasis*, but when deemed worthy of this union, they use *cataphasis* in terms of their experience to enter the realm of perfect incomprehension and the *apophasis* of the divine Being. Only the ones who are deemed by divine grace as “divine-like” [θεοειδέις] become worthy of this union that goes beyond any capability the human mind and human eyesight has.

Such a mystical theology precludes any abstract and purely mental knowledge and intuition, which might be used to adjust the human thought to

the mystery of Holy Trinity. For this reason, according to Palamas there cannot be any true Theology without direct experience of God [θεοπτία]. Palamas' theology is based on this direct experience and what the Saints have discussed about this.<sup>10</sup>

It would be a worthwhile task to review and provide a detailed commentary on the rest of the discussion one can find in the Metropolitan's PhD thesis. But I cannot do this within the constraints of a paper published in a journal. What should be done however, here is to try to see how the Metropolitan tried to apply these ideas in concrete examples of contemporary interest. This will add support to main claim about the Metropolitan's work and message for Palamists here and will elucidate how the Metropolitan thought himself Palamas' teachings can be applied to contemporary affairs. I will refer below to such an example, by referring to an interview that he gave in a YouTube channel operated by an Orthodox parish in Greece.

### *2019 Interview in Greece: Sacrifice and Service in the Orthodox Church*

During 2019, Metropolitan Amfilochios expressed publicly his disagreement with certain actions that he saw as going against the spirit of synodical decision making and proper ecclesiastical order in the Orthodox Church.<sup>11</sup> As a result of this, he was invited to take part in discussion panels in radio, tv and YouTube channels in Greece to discuss and clarify his views. In one of these discussion panels (organised via a YouTube Channel at the Church of Evangelistrias of the Holy Metropolis of Peiraeus) in October 2019, with Fr Spyridon Tsimouris as a co-ordinator, Metropolitan Amfilochios discussed with Professor Christos Yannaras issues related to the Orthodox Church, the Synod as a way of life of the Church and the role of self-sacrifice and service in the

<sup>10</sup> The Metropolitan here cites: *Επιστ. Προς Ακίνδ.* Α, 9; Χρήστου επιμ., *Συγγρ.* Α, p. 213; *Α Προς Βαρλαάμ*, 33; *Συγγρ.* Α, p.244; *Υπέρ των Ιερώς Ησυχάζόντων*, 3, 3, 6; *Συγγρ.* Α, p. 685). See also Ράντοβιτς, *Το μυστήριο της Αγίας Τριάδος*, 32-38.

<sup>11</sup> See for example a report on what was expressed in <https://mitropolija.com/> here: [https://oukraniko.blogspot.com/2019/10/blog-post\\_290.html](https://oukraniko.blogspot.com/2019/10/blog-post_290.html) (accessed on 14/09/2021).



Church.<sup>12</sup> Metropolitan Amfilochios repeated there some ideas from his earlier work (including his PhD) and highlighted three main theses: firstly, he insisted that, as St Justin Popovitch indicated earlier, there can be no other focus in the life of any Orthodox Christian today but the life of Christ, His Crucifixion, His Death and His Resurrection; the way of life of Christ is the only true life for a human being. Secondly, he also highlighted that the crisis in the Orthodox Church today is not a new phenomenon, nor is the reason for such a phenomenon a newly found reason. It is based in the attempt by many to place knowledge against the true life of the Church; in a much similar situation in the 14<sup>th</sup> c., St Gregory Palamas used the teachings of the Fathers of the Church to defend the true life of the Orthodox Church against all those influenced by a western scholastic approach to knowledge and the life of the Church. Thirdly, he highlighted the fact, when one sees the true life of the Church, in its proper perspective, it can only be a life of self-sacrifice and service to others. He brought here the example of the Blessed Patriarch of Serbia Pavlos, who "during the Synods of his Church, he did not govern the Church; he offered himself in self-sacrificing service to his Church". This is the meaning of the First in a true Synodical way of existence in the true life of the Orthodox Church. A paradigm of how a true synodical way of existence and decision making in the Church can take place exists in the first few years of the Church, in the examples of the Apostles as described in the Acts.

### *Conclusion*

In the PhD of the Metropolitan Amfilochios as well as the mentioned above interview, we see how his overall Palamism was expressed in his words, thoughts, acts and in general his whole way of life. Not only he used the cultural criticism that can be found in the works of Palamas against the Western approach to the Church and the Christian way of life, but he actually used arguments found in the works of Palamas to indicate where the problem is and what

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.diakonima.gr/2019/10/26/o-mitropolitis-mavrovouniou-amfilochios-rantovitske-o-christos-giannaras-sto-enoria-en-drasi/> (accessed 14/09/2021) and the You Tube Channel video here: <https://youtu.be/yNoIvfKjDvM>

are the reasons for the current crises in the Orthodox Church. Also, he used many examples from the life of Palamas and his overall way of service to others and the Orthodox Church to highlight how contemporary thinking humans can and should live in today's difficulties and crises. In this way, we can see the validity of his overall thesis that St Gregory Palamas' works are more important for us today than the people of his time.

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