


Understanding God's (im)mutability and (im)passibility: A Greek patristic point of view

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that patristic theology has resolved the problem of God's immutability, which is affirmed paradoxically Holy Scripture. This resolution has been achieved through clarifying of the distinction between God's essence and his uncreated energies. The Eastern Fathers successfully synthesized key theological concepts: the changelessness of God and his dynamic activity in relation to creation. This synthesis is most profoundly articulated in the Palamite doctrine of the uncreated energies. These energies, while emanating from the changeless essence of God, are nevertheless subject to change. According to this teaching, God is a Trinity of Persons who exists on two primary planes: within himself and in his self-revelation, both in the realms of Theologia and Economia. He is unchangeable in essence, yet changeable, alive, active, and ever-new in his providential action of saving the world through his energies. Because he is transcendent, he can be immanent, instilling in the souls who love him a deeper thirst to know and experience him more profoundly.

Contribution: The dogmatic formulas in Eastern Christianity are apophatic, antinomic and paradoxical because they encompass essentially contradictory aspects of a living and inexhaustibly rich reality. Thus, by their very nature, dogmas express everything: the infinite and the finite united – without losing their own being in all their dimensions.

Keywords: antinomy; apophatism; immutability; impassibility; mutability; possibility; Eastern Christianity; Eastern Church Fathers.

Introduction

A perennial subject of theological debate in both Eastern and Western Christianity has been the paradoxical and antinomic manner in which God reveals himself in Holy Scripture: on the one hand transcendent, and on the other hand immanent; on one hand unchangeable and immutable, and on the other, profoundly involved in history. Additionally, the sharp distinction between the impassible God of the Greek philosophers and the living, passible and emotionally charged God of Scripture has led to the emergence of two distinct groups of theologians: the impassibilists (Lister 2013; Mozley 1926; Weinandy 1984) and the passibilists (Fiddes 1988; Fretheim 1984; Hallman 1991; Moltmann 1974). The theological literature produced in both directions of inquiry is impressive, with countless studies and monographs being published in recent times (Dolezal 2011, 2014; Dorner 1994; Duby 2016; Gavrilyuk 2004; Gunton 2002; Hinlicky 2016; Holmes 2012, 2018; eds. Keating & White 2009; Krotke 2001; Matz 2019; eds. McCall & Rea 2009; Richards 2003; Sia 1987; Stump 2016; Webster 2015).

In the theological thought of the last decades, the dominant trend remains passibilist, labelled as the rise of a 'new orthodoxy' (Goetz 1986:385–389), in which the classical Christian understanding of God as simple, immutable and impassible is challenged on both exegetical and existential grounds. As Gavrilyuk remarked in 2004:

Many contemporary theologians, representing various perspectives such as theology of the cross, kenotic theology, biblical theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, process theology, openness theology, as well as philosophical and historical theologies, have voiced their opinions in favor of divine passibility [*believing*]... that the concept of divine impassibility is untenable on philosophical, exegetical, and broadly religious grounds. (p. 1)

The theological context described above, in which the cross is seen as the sole source of knowledge (theology of the cross), where Christ is perceived as undergoing a diminishment of his divinity through the Incarnation (kenotic theology), where the primary focus of the theological inquiry is the liberation of the oppressed (liberation theology) or the defence of women's rights (feminist

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theology), where God is viewed as subject to the process of temporal evolution (process theology) or as not being omniscient, all-knowing (openness theology), defines the passibilistic modern theological background that renders the allegedly impassibilistic patristic heritage so difficult to receive and understand today.

Given this passibilistic theological background, the allegedly impassibilist patristic heritage is today hardly received. It has become almost commonplace in contemporary theological works to pass a negative judgement upon the patristic concept of the divine impassibility, associating it with Greek philosophical concepts. A common critique situates divine impassibility within the conceptual framework of Hellenistic philosophy, where the term was purportedly used to refer to the lack of feelings and God's apathy towards the outside world. In this context, a widely accepted distinction has been adopted between Hebrew and Greek theological perspectives on the (im)passibility and (im)mutability of the divine (Stump 2016:18–19). According to this interpretation, the God of the philosophers is seen as indifferent, whereas the God of the prophets and apostles is depicted as a God of pathos and emotions. These two theological views needed reconciliation within the Christian faith, a task accomplished by the patristic theology of the Eastern Church.

This article aims to demonstrate that, through antinomic and apophatic explanations, the Eastern Fathers successfully achieved a uniquely distinct synthesis of two concepts: the changelessness of God and his life and activity in relation to creation. This synthesis found its most consequential formulation in the Palamite doctrine of the uncreated energies which do change although they come forth from the essence of God which remains unchanged. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1994) states:

This doctrine takes seriously the fact that God has a personal character and as such can, like every person, live on more than one plane, or, better, on two principal planes: the plane of existence in oneself and the plane of activity for the other. A mother, for example, can play with her child, bringing herself down to his level, yet at same time she preserves her mature consciousness as mother, God in himself, who is above time, meets with the creatures of time through his energies. (p. 150)

God chooses to communicate and descend to his creatures in a manner that they might be able to perceive and understand him. By remaining both transcendent and immanent simultaneously, he can maintain the deepest loving ties with them and engage with them directly through his energies in a real, intimate, personal and authentic manner.

To explain more fully these two modes of God's existence, the Church Fathers employed a series of analogies:

The disc of the sun gives light, states St. Gregory Palamas, yet no one knows its hidden essence simply by knowing something of its light. Likewise, the Divinity is known only through what is imparted to us from it [τὰ θεῖα μόναις ταῖς μετοχαῖς ἐπιγινώσκειται]. (Palamas 1973:323)

The human person, the true image of God, was also seen by the Church Fathers as capable of indicating, by analogy, the mode of existence on two planes of the Divine Persons. Just as each person has an interior life whose depths cannot be fully fathomed by another, remaining unknown unless manifested through external works, so too is God, in his essence, an unfathomable, immeasurable and immutable depth, who manifests himself through divine energies that make his essence known, energies distinct yet inseparable from his essence (Stăniloae 1993:6).

The two modes of God's existence might seem reducible to one another, as Karl Rahner suggests in his much-debated statement: 'The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity' (Rahner 1997:23). However, for the Eastern Fathers, the essence of God transcends any manifestation of itself through his uncreated energies, being infinitely more than all that God reveals in his creation and providential care of the world. The divine essence is revealed and manifested through the uncreated energies, which are themselves eternal, yet this essence is compelled by nothing and is not exhausted in doing so, remaining the infinite source capable of fully manifesting in other modes or works. If these two modes of existence were reducible, God would be compelled to create the world and assume incarnate form, in order to become who he really and truly is (Stăniloae 1993:99).

Methodological approach: Apophatism, cataphatism and antinomy in Eastern Patristic thought

According to patristic tradition, there is a rational or cataphatic approach to knowing God and an apophatic or ineffable one. The cataphatic method proceeds by affirmations, employing positive definitions, terms, and analogies that, as far as possible, characterise who God is, depicting his nature through the highest degrees of affirmative verbal or symbolic expression. With this theological method, all possible means of logic and language are used to describe God as possessing 'divine attributes', as embodying goodness, wisdom, simplicity, immutability and beauty itself. This involves an analogical comparison between the imperfect, as the created being and the eternal, using all possible means of logic and language to demonstrate that a flawless and absolutised existence is essentially God's nature. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1994) notes:

We know God through cataphatic knowledge only as the creating and sustaining cause of the world, while through apophatic knowledge we gain a kind of direct experience of his mystical presence which surpasses the simple knowledge of him as cause who is invested with certain attributes similar to those of the world. This latter knowledge is termed apophatic because the mystical presence of God experienced through it transcends the possibility of being defined in words. This knowledge is more adequate to God than is the cataphatic knowledge. (p. 95)

Apophatism entails going beyond and negating any humanly formulated concept of God, positing that everything which can be said about him must be affirmed through the negation of all our positive assertions about God. The patristic tradition did not regard apophatism as merely a verbal exercise or a form of philosophical theology, as it recognised the significant risk of idolising finite, human concepts of God when relying solely on a strictly 'logical' and 'rational' theology.

To the Greek Fathers, apophatism meant much more than a simple negation. In their writings, the process of negation is not a purely verbal exercise, but it rather serves as the foundation or springboard for transcending all language and discursive thought. Through their negations, they seek to move beyond words and concepts to the transcendental, thus attaining an immediate, supra-rational experience of the Divine. On this deeper, mystical level, the apophatic path ceases to be merely a philosophical theory and becomes inseparable from the journey towards union with the living God (Ware 1975a:48, Ware 1975b:128).

The great Cappadocians employed this apophatic approach to defend the Christian faith against heretics. In his fight against Eunomius, who believed that God's essence could be defined by intellectual concepts, St. Basil the Great showed that neither the divine essence alone nor created essences can be fully expressed in concepts, as intellectual analysis cannot exhaust the content of the object of perception. There will always be an 'irrational residue' that escapes analysis and cannot be captured in concepts; this is the unknowable depth of things, which constitutes their true, indefinable essence (*Adversus Eunomium* I, 6, PG 29, 521–524).

His brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa continuing the controversy with Eunomius, also argued that any concept related to God, when absolutised, can become a simulacrum, a false likeness, an idol. Without an apophatic approach, the intellectual concepts based on intelligible representations could become idols of God instead of revealing God himself (*Contra Eunomium* X, PG 45, 828, Jaeger 1960:239).

The Church Fathers had no preference for either minimising or maximising cataphatic, positive, or rational knowledge. They demonstrated that the human mind, being so susceptible to fallibility and change, cannot fully comprehend the infinity of God's being, and thus requires apophatic theologising. St. John Damascene emphasises this in his *Dogmatics*, by stating:

God, then, is infinite and incomprehensible, and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. All that we can say cataphatically concerning God does not show forth His nature but the things that relate to His nature [τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν] ... God does not belong to the class of existing things: not that He has no existence, but that He is above all existing things, nay even above existence itself. For if all forms of knowledge have to do with what exists, assuredly that which is above knowledge must certainly be also above essence [1449]; and, conversely, that which is above essence will also be above knowledge. (*Expositio fidei* 4, 36, PG 94, 800AB, Kotter 1973:13)

In their apophatic theologising, the Fathers of the Eastern Christian tradition also resorted to antinomy to avoid the risk of making idols out of finite, human concepts. By 'antinomy' they meant the affirmation of two contrasting or opposed truths that cannot be reconciled at the level of discursive reason, yet can be harmonised at the higher level of contemplative experience.

Because God lies 'beyond' the world in a unique sense, he cannot be precisely conceived by human reason or exactly described by human language. But if there are no exact descriptions of God, there are many ways leading to him. In order to reach out towards that which is inconceivable, the Christian tradition speaks in 'antinomic' fashion ... 'saying and unsaying to a positive effect' (Ware 1977:46).

There was a time in theological thought when such a coincidence of opposites was deemed incompatible with reason. Whenever such a synthesis was encountered, reason would break it up into irreconcilable and contradictory notions, setting some elements against others or trying to forcefully meld them into one new element (Stăniloae 1994:250).

This is why, in Eastern Christian Theology, reason has adapted to view the antinomic model of understanding God as the most relevant and suitable way to express the dual truth of God's otherness and nearness, as found in Scripture. For the Greek Patristics, the Deity is:

[T]otally transcendent and yet totally immanent, unseen but seen, incomprehensible and yet the deep meaning of everything, revealing Himself in so many ways, infinitely beyond all participation and yet closer to us than our own heart. (Ware 1994:XX–XXI)

Apophatism was regarded by the Church Fathers as an attitude of mind that rejects all abstract and purely intellectual theology, which would adapt the mysteries of God's wisdom to human ways of thought. 'All true theology was seen as fundamentally apophatic' (Lossky 1973:38). For the Church Fathers, Christian faith meant the union with the living God and not a philosophical school for conjecturing about theoretical matters. They adhered to the apophatic principle of theology and never allowed their thought to cross the threshold of mystery or to replace God himself with pure intellectual ideas, despite their extensive philosophical knowledge and inclination towards speculation. Patristic theology proved to be never abstract, but rather contemplative, elevating the mind to those realities which surpass all understanding and presenting the dogmas of the Church as antinomies, showing that the more difficult they are to resolve, the more sublime the mystery they express. As Vladimir Lossky (1973) remarks:

It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of a change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him. (p. 42)

In the following analysis, this method of theologising in line with the patristic tradition will be employed. Through antinomy, apophaticism and paradox, the patristic teaching on the distinction between the essence of God and the uncreated divine energies will be presented. Subsequently, building on this distinction and utilising the same methodological approach, the mutability or immutability of God will be analysed from both a Trinitarian and Christological perspective. This approach of 'saying and unsaying to a positive effect' (Ware 1977:46) is the one that can most effectively support the theological discourse in adequately describing both the immanence and transcendence of God, as well as his mutability and immutability.

Antinomy and apophatism in understanding the Holy Trinity: Defining the terminology

The antinomic and apophatic language of the Fathers is biblically grounded. The Holy Scripture describes God in two distinct manners: on the one hand, as a 'living God' who is actively and personally present to his people (Jug 8:19; 1 Ki 17:1), a God who delivers his chosen people from hunger, thirst and the sword (Dt 28:1–5; Ex 17:6; 2 Sm 3:18), who leads them out of the country of Egypt (Ex 13:17). He is the God who uses priests, kings, judges and, most of all, prophets to reveal his existence and desires. He reveals himself as the God who is close by, who watches and hears his people. In short, as John Peckham (2021) states:

The Scripture depicts God as a covenantal God who creates, sustains, and creates anew; speaks, hears, and responds; sees, provides, delivers/saves, and rules; knows, plans, wills, calls, and chooses but has unfulfilled desires; judges, acts justly, and mercifully and graciously forgives; loves compassionately, passionately, and steadfastly; grieves, suffers, laments, and relents; promises, covenants, and engages in covenant relationship. (p. 15)

But while active and present in time and history, God reveals himself also as the one who is beyond and above time and history, as the Lord and King of all creation as 'the first and the last' (Is 41:4; 44:6), as the Creator God who existed before the formation of the universe, the all-powerful (Ps 135), the Almighty (Dt 4:32–40), who 'never changes' and whose 'years are unending' (Ps 102:27). He does not come into being or die like a human does. He is unlike anything in the created universe (Dt 5:8; Ex 20:4) and declares, 'Surely I the Lord do not change', (Mt 3:6).

The New Testament also retains this antinomic way of speaking about God. He, who is the 'Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change' (Jas 1:17), sent his beloved Son into the world to become flesh and dwell among men (Jn 1:1–14). He, the Known and yet Unknown (2 Cor 6:9), he, the 'totally Other' beyond, above and outside creation, transcendent and inaccessible, became immanent in the world and accessible to humans through his incarnation. He, the *Mysterium tremendum*, the unknowable, whom 'no one has ever contemplated' (St. John, 1, 4:12)

descended to meet his creature face to face, making it possible to be seen 'as He is' (St. John, 1, 3:2).

To express this dual truth that God is both hidden and revealed, transcendent and immanent, Orthodox theology distinguishes between the divine essence and divine energies, between *Theologia* and *Economia*, between 'God in Se' and 'God ad extra' (Bradshaw 2013:27–50; Loudovikos 2013:122–149; Zhukovskyy 2023:694–695). The Essence (*οὐσία*) means God as he is in himself and the energies (*ἐνέργειαι*) mean God in action and revelation of himself. The essence remains forever beyond all participation and knowledge in this age, as in the age to come; it can be understood neither by humans, nor by angels, but uniquely by the Three Divine Persons themselves. However, God's energies, which are God himself, fill the whole universe and all can partake in them through grace. God is unknowable 'essentially', but is revealed 'existentially' or through 'energies' (Ware 1977:49).

This distinction between essence and energies has been and continues to be a highly debated topic in theological literature (Aghiorgoussis 1978:15–41; Anastos 1993:335–349; Athanasopoulos 2013:50–68; Barrois 1975:211–231; Bradshaw 2013:27–50; Contos 1966:283–294; Damian 1996:101–112; De Halleux 1975:479–493; Grondijs 1962:323–328; Habra 1957:244–252; Loudovikos 2013:122–149; Martzelos 2013:149–158; Patacsi 1977:64–71; Van Rossum 2003). For the Fathers of the Eastern Church, such as the great Cappadocians, St. Maximus, St. John Damascene and St. Gregory Palamas, this distinction was of major importance for reconciling the two different biblical perspectives on God's existence. They succeeded in achieving a synthesis of the two concepts: the changelessness of God in his essence and his mutability shown in his life and activity in regard to creation. God is a Trinity of Persons, a living God, transcendent in his being, yet at the same time immanent and knowable through his energies, through his actions in the world, able to show his love in infinite forms that are easily understood by his creatures without losing or changing anything in his divinity.

St. Basil the Great asserts that God communicates himself to humanity solely through his works, while his essence and innermost being remain inaccessible to humans both in the present age and in the age to come:

It is to be expected that the very substance of God is incomprehensible [*ἀπερίοπτον*] to everyone except the Only-Begotten and the Holy Spirit. But we are led up from the activities of God and gain knowledge of the Maker through what He has made, and so come in this way to an understanding of his goodness and wisdom. For what can be known about God [*τὸ γνωστόν τοῦ Θεοῦ*] is that which God has manifested [*Rm 1.19*] to all human beings. Since whatever the theologians seem to have recorded about the substance of God has been expressed in figurative language or even in allegories ... (*Adversus Eunomium I, 14, PG 29, 544B*).

He also states the same idea in Epistle 234, which is addressed to his disciple Amphilohius of Iconium (Courtonne 1966):

The operations are various, and the essence simple [αἱ μὲν ἐνέργειαι ποικίλαι, ἡ δὲ οὐσία ἀπλή], but we say that we know our God from His operations [ἐκ μὲν τῶν ἐνεργειῶν], but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach [Αἱ μὲν γὰρ ἐνέργειαι αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς καταβαίνουσιν, ἡ δὲ οὐσία αὐτοῦ μένει ἀπρόσιτος] ... So knowledge of the divine essence involves perception of His incomprehensibility, and the object of our worship is not that of which we comprehend the essence, but of which we comprehend that the essence exists [καὶ σεπτὸν οὐ τὸ καταληφθὲν τίς ἡ οὐσία, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία]. (p. 42)

St. Gregory of Nyssa offers additional important insights into the relationship between God's essence and works, demonstrating that humans can come to know the divine attributes but not the essence of God, 'He who by His nature is invisible, becomes visible by His energies, in some of the things around Him' [Ὁ γὰρ τῆ φύσει ἀόρατος, ὁρατὸς ταῖς ἐνεργείαις γίνεται, ἔν τισι τοῖς περὶ αὐτὸν καθορώμενος] (*Orationes de beatitudinibus VI*, PG 44, 1269A).

St. Maximus the Confessor asserts that these divine energies are connected to the essence, originating from God's essence but remaining distinct from it. Uncreated like the essence, they eternally manifest 'around God' as the radiance of his essence, and also in the logoi, the rational principles of creation, without being identical to them (Karayiannis 2013:232–256). These energies are the 'providential outpourings' through which God, who is absolute and incommunicable in essence, becomes fully communicable in a living and personal manner to his creatures (*Ambigua ad Joannem 22*, PG 91, 1257AB; Constan 2014:449; Larchet 2010:332–421).

The distinction between essence and energies is further clarified by St. John of Damascus and St. Gregory Palamas. The latter managed to systematise the entire patristic teaching on the distinction between essence and energies, articulating and clarifying it in his writings, as well as in the decisions of several synods held in Constantinople during his lifetime and shortly after his death (1341, 1347, 1351, 1368) (Karmiris 1960:354–410). He was keen on providing some extremely useful clarifications regarding this teaching of faith, specifying that the distinction (διάκρισις) between essence and energies in no way alters divine simplicity and does not bring any composition (σύνθεσις) in God, because God's energy belongs to his essence and is also uncreated (ἄκτιστος). At the same time, the term 'Divinity' (Θεότης) must be applied not only to God's essence but also to his energies. He further states that the energies are common to all three Persons of the Trinity, and no energy can be associated with a single Divine Person to the exclusion of the other two. This is certainly a reaffirmation of the basic Cappadocian principle that in their operations ad extra, the Three Persons of the Divinity always act together. As St. Gregory Palamas affirms in his Confession of Faith, submitted to and formally approved by the Council of Constantinople in 1351:

God is not revealed in His essence [οὐσία], for no one has seen or described the nature [φύσις] of God; but He is revealed in the

grace (χάρις), power (δύναμις) and energy (ἐνεργία) that is common to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Karmiris 1960:408)

Does God change? – The Eastern Patristic view

The distinction between essence and energies was employed by the Eastern Patristic tradition to clarify divine attributes, including addressing the challenging issue of God's immutability or mutability. Paul Gavriluk sought to synthesise the solutions offered by the patristic tradition for the scriptural paradox regarding God's possibility or impossibility of suffering. He tried to demonstrate that there was no single, monolithic patristic view of impassibility. Instead, 'divine impassibility [was] primarily a metaphysical term, marking God's unlikeness to everything in the created order, not a psychological term denoting (as modern passibilists allege) God's emotional apathy' (Gavriluk 2009:139). Gavriluk stated that 'divine impassibility functioned as an apophatic qualifier of all divine emotions' (Gavriluk 2009:173) and tried to find the right balance between passibilistic and impassibilistic theology, arguing that 'passibility and impassibility are correlative concepts, both of which must have their place in any sound account of divine agency' (Gavriluk 2004:20).

It is regrettable that in his entire exposition, the author did not take into discussion the Palamite distinction between essence and energies. Consequently, he fails to transcend and reconcile the theological disputes for or against passibilism, which all originate from the lack of distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, between God's essence and his energies through which he manifests himself in the world. The Eastern Patristic tradition is unanimous in emphasising that, in his essence, God is unchangeable and his essence is above any naming and beyond anything that the human mind can comprehend and describe. What can be perceived about God, however, are the 'beneficent outpourings of the divine spring', as Dionysius the Areopagite (*De divinis nominibus 2*, P. G. III, col. 641D–644D) describes them, whereby God as a Trinity of Persons desires to enter into a dialogue of love with his rational and free creatures who are filled with joy and capable of responding as persons to this divine love.

God did not create a static world; rather, he created a world, in which he manifests himself as both Life and Mystery, being simultaneously immanent and transcendent. He fashioned a world, that is not petrified within static rationality or trapped in an endlessly circular movement but a world in which he is present with his providential love, a living world of the living God through which he produces a canticle that advances in its melodic themes, as St. Gregory of Nazianz states (*Oratio 28*, PG 36, 33) 'God continues to speak to us through the world', states Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae:

[I]n a way that we can understand and to lead us towards a goal. He is not only the creator of this vast lute but also the one who plays on it a canticle of vast proportions and complexity. (Stăniloae 1994:98)

In this divine canticle, God employs all his wisdom and love, rendering this dialogue the ultimate form of personal communication with his creation. All biblical descriptions of God's emotional involvement in humans' lives should be understood from this perspective of the personal relationship that the Creator seeks to establish through his uncreated energies with his creatures. In Peckham's (2021) opinion:

Scripture consistently teaches that God's love is good, holy, kind, just, faithful, freely given, generous, unmerited, evaluative, warm, deeply compassionate, intensely passionate (but never irrational), long-suffering, merciful, gracious, everlastingly steadfast, relationally responsive, covenantal, and continually active for the good of all. The God of Scripture persistently draws people into relationship with himself, inviting and calling ... (p. 2021:53)

The Holy Scripture shows how God, through accommodative and analogical language, communicates with his creation, the human beings, in a manner suitable for them, adopting forms that are finite and changeable (Dolezal 2014:135). It also illustrates how God changes solely in relational ways, to create and care for his creation. (Padgett 2001:109)

The depiction of God in Scripture as capable of experiencing a wide range of feelings and emotions akin to those of his created beings is a clear manifestation of his omnipotence. Only an absolute God, an all-powerful God, a Triune God of Persons, can possess such intentionality of personal communion with his creatures. Through his divine energies, God extends himself into the world, works within it and communicates by adapting to his rational creatures, and ultimately descends in it, hypostatically uniting with the very creation fashioned by his hands.

All these blessed outreaches bear the mark of God's complete and personal involvement. The God of Scripture is both the 'compassionate God' (Dt 4:31; Ex 34:6-7) but also the 'jealous' or 'passionate' God (Dt 4:24; Ex 34:14). God is passionately concerned about the lives of human beings and the establishment of justice among them. While humans are prone to overreaction, God never overreacts. God, 'being compassionate', often 'restrained His anger' (Is 48:9), is often portrayed as the unrequited lover of an unfaithful spouse, and God's 'jealousy' is always portrayed as a righteous passion for an exclusive relationship with his people (see Is 62:4; Jr 2:2; 3:1-12; Ezk 16, 23; Hs 1-3; Zch 8:2; cf. 2 Cor 11:2), which Scripture sharply differentiates from the often unrighteous passion of human jealousy (Peckham 2021:64).

Biblical language is accommodative and analogical, and should not be used to enforce 'any mythological reduction of the divinity to human proportions' (O'Hanlon 1990:23), because the apparent biblical paradox concerning God is the sign of his perfection, which allows him to be both Mystery and Life, a living God who interacts interpersonally while remaining transcendent and immanent. This biblical antinomy can thus be comprehended: only an omnipotent and transcendent God can live with maximum intensity the loving relationships with his creatures and engage with them

in a genuine, living and personal dialogue of love through his energies.

One can speak of change in God solely in relation to his works and visible manifestations within his interactions with the world, wherein, motivated by his profound love and desire to draw humans into a deeper dialogue of love with himself, he adapts, manifests himself in a personal way, and approaches humans in a manner replete with emotions and feelings, while remaining impassible and transcendent in his essence.

In this dialogue of love, humans know as much as they can perceive from God's works, discerning what God reveals himself to be, but do so in the dynamic and personal manner in which God has chosen to reveal himself, presenting himself as both transcendent and immanent, both impassible and passible, in order to enable humans to grow continuously in communion with him:

It seems to me, says St. Gregory of Nazianz, that, through what is perceived, He attracts me to him (for the one who is totally unperceived gives no hope and no help); and through what is unperceived, He stirs up my admiration; and being admired, He is longed for again; and being longed for, He cleanses us; and cleansing us, He gives us divine image; and so becoming, He speaks with us like with his household; the word even dare say something bolder: God unites himself with gods and is known by them, namely as much as He knows those who know him. Therefore God is infinite and difficult to be contemplated. And only this is perceived of him: infinity. (Oratio 38 In Theofania, PG 36, 317)

God is above anything that can be conceived by the human mind, as he is a self-existent Being who possesses all things through his will and works. He chooses to reveal himself antinomically in modes adapted to the human condition, leading it to stages that increasingly reflect his nature and correspond more and more to himself. He manifests himself in the personal dynamism of his work and is thereby known as an eternal source of love, perpetually characterised by newness (Stăniloae 1994):

We experience nothing from God, in content, other than his varied operations that have to do with the world, which is to say, in relation to us, states Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. Beyond this we know that at their basis is the personally subsistent essence, but how it is, we do not know, for it is an essence beyond all essences. All we know in God is his dynamism experienced in relation to the world or through the prism that we ourselves are, a dynamism not subject to any necessity at all, that is, not subject to passion and totally free. (p. 126)

In revealing himself as both immanent and transcendent, God instils in the souls who love him a profound thirst to know and experience him even more profoundly, while he remains forever conceptually indefinable, immutable and incomprehensible in his essence.

Through antinomy and apophatism, the Orthodox Patristic theology articulated God's dynamic mode of communicating himself to creatures, without being exhausted, as a Trinity of

Persons united in the boundless affection of perfect love, through the doctrine of the uncreated energies. Through these energies, God wholly gives himself in various modes, without ever being depleted and consistently manifesting the same unwavering love. By increasingly communicating himself in these energies, he not only never exhausts himself, but he also elevates the human being to ever-higher levels of knowledge, experiences and states of happiness.

Antinomy and apophatism in understanding Eastern Patristic Christology: The passible and impassible suffering of the Logos

Debates concerning the (im)mutability of God have given rise, since the early centuries, to a series of Christological disputes concerning the death and suffering of the Savior on the cross. The Church Fathers were compelled to provide pertinent answers to questions such as: How can a loving God, while remaining immutable, become man? How does God, being born, suffer, die and love as a man? Do the Incarnation and the death on the Cross bring about any change in God?

The main contention of the patristic understanding of the incarnation is that God, while remaining fully divine, became human, accepted the limitations of human existence, subjected himself to voluntary suffering for the salvation of the world and triumphed over sin, death and corruption in the end. The early Church Fathers agreed that for God to suffer, he had to make human nature his own, for without the Incarnation, there is no possibility to speak of God's suffering. The assertion: 'by incarnation God suffered impassibly' played a pivotal role in the patristic thought (Mozley 1926; Muller 1983:22–40). During the 1st century, the suffering of God on the cross was one of the main topics of theological debate. It is important to note that all the major heresies of the early centuries centred on the Person and salvific work of the Savior Jesus Christ. Thus, the Church Fathers took a stand against Docetism which claimed that the Saviour, being divine, could not suffer and that his suffering on the cross was merely apparent. They also opposed Patripassianism, which postulated that because the Father and the Son are one, the Father suffered on the cross in place of the Son, thus compromising the Father's full divinity and transcendence. They then went on and refuted Arianism, which denied the divinity of the Son of God on the grounds that he was subject to change, birth, suffering and death on the cross. In fighting against these heresies, the Church affirmed that the Son of God suffered in reality and not only in appearance; that it was the Son, not the Father, who became incarnate and suffered; that the Son's suffering brought no change in his divine nature, and that there was no necessity of nature in the incarnation and the passion. 'It is not a work of nature, but a mode of economic condescension', according to St. John the Damascene (*Contra Jacobitas*, 52, P.G. 94, 1464 A, Kotter 1981:126–127), it is the work of the will, the mystery of divine love and not of a necessity. For the

Greek Fathers, the 'purposes' and 'ideas' do not belong to the essence of God, but to the will common to the Trinity. That is why the incarnation of the Son, which is a manifestation of love, does not introduce any change or new reality into the inner being of the Trinity. If 'the Word was made flesh' – ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο – this 'becoming' in no way affects the divine nature. 'The Word, though remaining what It was, became what It was not', according to St. Gregory the Theologian (*Oratio* 3, 19, PG 36, 100A).

Such is the meaning of the Christological dogma formulated by the Council of Chalcedon (Denzinger 1865):

In conformity with the tradition of the Fathers, we unanimously proclaim that we should confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, perfect in deity and perfect in humanity, true God and true man, composed of a reasonable soul and body, being consubstantial with the Father through the Divinity and consubstantial with us through the humanity, alike to us in all, save sin, born of the Father before all the worlds in His deity, born in these last times of Mary the Virgin, Mother of God, in His humanity, for us and for our salvation; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-Begotten, who was made known in two natures without being mingled, without change, indivisibly, inseparably, in such a way that the union does not destroy the difference of the two natures, but on the contrary the properties of each nature only remain the more firm since they are found united in one person or hypostasis which is neither separated nor divided into two persons, being the one and the same person of the Son, only-Begotten, God and Word, Lord Jesus Christ. (pp. 44–46)

What strikes one about this formula is its antinomic and apophatic character; in fact, the union of the two natures is expressed by four negative definitions: ἀσυγγύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαρέτως and ἀχωρίστως.

The Church Fathers describe the union of the two natures in one person by these terms, but the 'how' of this union remains a mystery. The Divine Person, Christ, embodies two natures which are distinct and united at the same time. One could say that the Son of God has suffered, that he died on the cross – but only in that which could suffer and die, his humanity. One could equally say that though he was born as an infant in the crib at Bethlehem, or was hung on the cross, or rested in the tomb, he did not cease to govern all-powerfully the whole of the created world, in virtue of his Divinity which suffers no change (Lossky 1973:115–116).

St. John the Damascene similarly employs antinomy to describe the union between human nature and God's nature in Jesus Christ:

When adoring my King and my God, I adore at the same time the porphyry of His Body'– writes the Damascene–not as a garment or a fourth person, but as a body united to God, and abiding without change, as well as the divinity by which it has been anointed. For the corporal nature has not become God but, just as the Word did not change and remained what He was though becoming flesh, so also the flesh became the Word without having lost what it had, though it was identified with the Word in the hypostasis'. (*Expositio fidei* III, 8, PG 94, 1013 C–1016 A; IV, 3, 1105 AB; Kotter 1975:29, 44)

The humanity of Christ is a deified nature that is permeated by the divine energies from the moment of the Incarnation.

Clarifying the role of the unique Person and the inseparability of natures in the Person's unity, St. Maximus the Confessor also describes antinomically the 'Communion of Idioms', the communication of attributes of the two natures of Christ as follows:

No one nature belonging to the same Hypostasis was activated in a separate manner from the other. The Hypostasis would make evident one through the other. Because [*Christ*] truly possessed both natures, as God He moved humanity and as man He revealed His own divinity. He suffered in a divine manner [θεϊκῶς τὸ πάσχειν ἔχων, ἐκούσιον γάρ], so to speak, because He suffered willingly, not being a simple man, and performed miracles in a human manner because He performed them through the body, since He was not entirely revealed as God. The passions are miraculous and new through the divine power of the nature of Him who suffered, and the miracles are endured, being accomplished through the suffering power of the body of Him who performed them. (Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Thomam* 5, 194, PG 91:1285; *Constans II* 2014:59)

Patristic theology emphasised that the Incarnation and death on the cross preserved the integrity of both natures of the Saviour. As St. Maximus the Confessor asserts:

Out of His infinite longing [ἀπειρῶ πόθῳ] for human beings, He has become truly and according to nature the very thing for which He longed [τὸ ποθοῦμενον γέγονε], neither suffering any change in His own being on account of His unutterable self-emptying, nor altering or diminishing anything whatsoever from human nature on account of His ineffable assumption of the flesh. (Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Thomam* 5, 31, PG 91:1050, *Constans I* 2014:35)

The two natures in Christ, being united in one Hypostasis, created a permanent synergy between them and a 'theandric way' of common action. Christ performed human actions in a manner beyond ordinary human capability, 'showing that human energy is conjoined with the divine power, because human nature, united without confusion to the divine nature, was completely penetrated by it, with absolutely no part of it remaining separate from the divinity to which it was united, having been assumed according to hypostasis.' (PG 91:1053, *Constans I* 2014:45).

Everything that Christ completed in the plan of salvation, including the death on the Cross was accomplished in a 'theandric' manner, which means that, in a way simultaneously divine and human, Christ accomplished both human and divine things in a unique manner. St Maximus notes:

Being God, He worked wonders in a human way, for they were accomplished through naturally passible flesh. Being man, He experienced the sufferings of human nature, but in a divine way, for they unfolded at the command of His sovereign will. Or rather, both were done in a theandric way, since He is God and man at the same time. (*Ambigua ad Thomam*, PG 91:1060, *Constans* 2014:57)

For the Church Fathers, the Incarnation and the suffering on the Cross represent the work of the economic Trinity. In Christ, the passible human nature became an instrument of omnipotent power. It was at once powerful and fragile, majestic and humble. This reality was antinomically expressed by St. Cyrill of Alexandria who would often say that:

They do not call the Father passible, nor the Son impassible, but rather they call the Godhead impassible, being without a body. The Lord is passible due to His assumption of a (human) body [Οὔτε τὸν Πατέρα λέγω παθητὸν, οὔτε τὸν Υἱὸν ἀπαθῆ ἄλλ' ἀπαθὲς μὲν τὸ Θεῖον, ὅτι καὶ ἀσώματον· παθητὸς δὲ ὁ Κύριος διὰ τὴν σάρκα]. (*Dialogus cum Nestorio*, PG 76, 253BC)

St. Marcus Eremita would also use this consecrated formulation: 'The Logos suffered impassibly' (ἀπαθῶς ἔπαθεν) in order to express the intimacy of the connection between two realities in Christ: the glorious power of the Godhead and the tragic reality of the suffering human condition (Durand 2000 II:293).

In teaching about the incarnation of the Logos, the Church Fathers posit the intimate union of the two realities as a salvific act or life-giving transaction:

The power of the one heals and transforms the fallibility of the other. The fragile passivity of the other makes possible a revelation of the incomprehensible power of the one in a suitably 'fragile' and approachable medium for other fallible and fragile human beings. (McGuckin 2004:185)

The mystery of salvation was articulated by the patristic tradition in a paradoxical and antinomical way. The Savior was simultaneously God and man, and in him, the human nature did not exceed the limits of its own capacities, for it was not conceived as independent and self-acting, being enhypostated in the unique Person of the incarnate Logos. At the same time, his Divinity did not become something else and did not undergo any alteration in the economy of salvation. Herein lies a permanent contribution of the Fathers, who denied any unqualified notion of God's 'naked' suffering outside the Incarnation while affirming the voluntary and redemptive suffering of the incarnate God, who had accepted the limitations of human existence for the sake of salvation, had triumphed over suffering and death, and had bestowed resurrection and immortality upon the human race. God's impassibility did not make him withdraw to the heavenly realm to observe Christ's death from above but guaranteed that it was God himself who participated in the experiences of human nature, such as birth, suffering, and death, making them his very own (Gavrilyuk 2004:19–20). The Savior endured suffering in the flesh in a manner beyond human comprehension, doing so in an economic way (Larchet 1996:503–509). In suffering on the Cross, the Hypostasis of the incarnate Word of God brought no alteration to the unified essence of the immanent Trinity, but rather demonstrated his omnipotence by willingly choosing to descend to the humble condition of fallen human nature, to restore his divine image imprinted in it (Crisp 2016:54–70).

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident how Patristic theology has endeavoured to articulate the *veritates fidei* of Revelation in an antinomical and apophatic manner. By distinctly delineating the realm of Theology from that of *Economia*, that is differentiating between God's Ad intra and Ad extra existence, distinguishing between God's essence and his energies, and asserting that in both manifestations it is the same God, Patristic theology posits that all creation is the product of the divine and eternal will, as a manifestation of his divine energies, and not the result of any necessity.

This entire theological endeavour of the Patristic tradition can undoubtedly serve as the foundation for future theological exploration and a vibrant ecumenical dialogue (Russel 2019:210–230). In the 21st century, there should no longer be policies of confessional rivalry in an era where mutual understanding is so possible and accessible. The Patristic heritage is a wealth for all, and by engaging with it, it can become a valuable aid and support in all future theological debates and ecumenical dialogue.

Conclusion

From this analysis, several conclusions can be drawn:

- In Eastern Patristic Theology, the coincidence of opposites was not considered incompatible with reason, as reason within theological thought had become accustomed, through apophatism, to perceiving the antinomic model of understanding God as the most precise and suitable method of expressing the double truth of God's otherness and yet nearness, as depicted in Scripture. For the Greek Patristics, the Deity is wholly transcendent and yet wholly immanent, unseen yet seen, incomprehensible and yet the profound meaning of everything, revealing himself in myriad ways, infinitely beyond all participation. By employing this antinomic approach, the Eastern Church Fathers avoided the risk of creating idols out of finite human concepts, stressing that apophatism is neither a verbal theological exercise, nor a form of philosophical theology, but rather a way to union with the living God.
- While emphasising the antinomic and paradoxical character of Christian theology, the Church Fathers employ the distinction-in-unity between God's essence and his uncreated energies. Gregory Palamas explained this differentiation in detail, noting that in the diversity of divine works, it is God, one in being, who is at work in each operation. The Eastern Christian apophatic and antinomic formulation of dogmas implies the fact that the human mind cannot fully comprehend God's infinity, grasping only the things that relate to his nature. Consequently, in his infinite love for creation, God came down into the world to meet humans' capacity for understanding him while simultaneously affirming his transcendence. God descends through his energies, while his personal character ensures his transcendence. He manifests himself as being both Life and Mystery, simultaneously immanent and transcendent, changeable and unchangeable, revealed and hidden, in order to enable humans to grow continuously in communion with him.

- The antinomic and apophatic way of thinking of the Eastern Church Fathers provided a suitable solution to the problem of Christ's suffering on the cross, which was the work of the economic Trinity who made human nature, through the Incarnation, the instrument of his omnipotent power. God is both passible and impassible. Only an impassible God in his essence could manifest himself as passible in the economy of salvation assuming and deifying human nature.
- The Logos suffered impassibly on the cross, and his Divinity did not become something else and did not undergo any alteration. In a manner beyond human comprehension, the Savior suffered in the flesh economically. Rather than altering the cohesive character of the immanent Trinity through his suffering on the Cross, the Hypostasis of the incarnate Word of God revealed his power by voluntarily descending to the lowly state of fallen human nature.
- The present study can serve as an impetus for contemporary theology to become more acquainted with the theological universe of the Eastern Fathers' thought. Their approach to Triadology, through apophaticism, paradox and antinomy, can infuse contemporary theological discourse with the freshness and beauty of Patristic thought, which conceives theology as the integration of the experiential and rational knowledge of God. Such a theological approach inherently offers something significant: the ecumenical dialogue can employ antinomy, paradox and apophaticism in expressing the truths of faith in such a way, as to allow a meaningful exchange of ideas as an effort towards mutual understanding, acceptance and respect.

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