



Knowledge of God in St Gregory Palamas

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Abstract

The topic of knowledge of God is one of the most important questions discussed by St Gregory Palamas in the majority of his works. Palamas distinguishes four basic types of knowledge of God: knowledge of God drawn from creation, Christian knowledge gained from Scripture and Tradition, mystical knowledge understood as true wisdom, and the deifying vision of the Light of Tabor, which is called knowledge only in an improper sense of this word. All the above types of cognition concerning God are deeply embedded in the whole of Palamite theology, being linked to ideas such as objective distinction between God's essence and energy or teaching about deification through participation in divine grace.

Keywords: St Gregory Palamas, hesychasm, knowledge of God, Orthodox theology

Słowa kluczowe: św. Grzegorz Palamas, hezychazm, poznanie Boga, teologia prawosławna

Introduction

The call to know God has been one of the most important religious concepts present in Christianity from its very beginning, a fact already witnessed by many New Testament passages, including the famous Johannite excerpt: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”.¹ The centrality of this question has also prevailed among numerous later Christian authors, including St Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), one of the most prominent mediaeval Orthodox theologians² and a chief representative of hesychasm,³ an Orthodox

¹ John 17:3 (according to ESV).

² On Palamas' theological and philosophical legacy see N. Russell, *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age*, New York 2019.

³ See Georgios Mantzaridis, *Hesychasm and Theology*, [in:] *Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism*, C. Athanasopoulos (ed.), Newcastle upon Tyne 2020, pp. 2–14.

monastic movement underscoring the importance of prayer of the heart and reaching the state of spiritual stillness (ἡσυχία).

Taking into account the fundamental and far-reaching interplay between the hesychastic practice, still predominant in the Orthodox monasticism, and the Palamite doctrine, it seems plausible to treat the proper understanding of Palamas' crucial concepts as a necessary prerequisite of any research devoted not only to hesychasm, but rather to any aspect of the Orthodox monastic tradition and spirituality. Apart from St Gregory's most famous teachings such as the objective distinction between God's essence and energies, the theory of deification or the vision of Tabor Light, this postulate should also include other vital aspects of his theology, his views on knowledge of God being one of them. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that this topic, although playing a pivotal role in Palamas' theology, has not so far been discussed in a systematic way.⁴

The aim of this article is, therefore, to discuss four primary ways in which St Gregory Palamas conceives knowledge of God, which are: knowledge drawn from creation, Christian knowledge gained from Scripture and Tradition, mystical knowledge understood as wisdom, and the deifying vision of the Light of Tabor, which is called knowledge only in an improper⁵ sense of this term. The notion of "knowledge of God" employed in this article constitutes first and foremost an English translation of the Greek expression γνῶσις θεοῦ or περὶ θεοῦ, although the analysis presented in this paper will also include other various derivatives of the word γνῶσις in reference to God, such as ἐπίγνωσις (cognition), γιγνώσκω (to perceive, to know, to learn), ἔννοια (notion), etc.

Apart from discussing all four primary ways of knowing God in Palamas individually, the article will also strive to show their deep interrelations as well as situate them in the general framework of Palamas' own vision of God, man, and divine energies,⁶ through which the latter may become united to the former. To make such a systematic presentation possible, it is necessary to begin with a few introductory remarks on St Gregory's concept of divine energies, the notion of participation and the basic principles of his epistemology with regard to the cognition of God.

⁴ A notable example of a scholarly text dealing with the topic of knowledge of God in Palamas is *Gregory Palamas and Our Knowledge of God* by Richard Swinburne. That text, however, focuses on the logical aspects of Palamas' cognition of God as well as on comparing St Gregory's ideas with those of Western and modern authors, rather than presenting a systematic view of his concepts.

⁵ That is by misuse of language, καταχρηστικῶς. Gregory Palamas, *Triadi*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, E. Perrella (ed.), Milano 2003, 2.3.33, pp. 676–677.

⁶ Due to the limited space and specific character of this article, only select, crucial notions of Palamite metaphysics will be discussed, consciously omitting numerous vital theological issues raised by St Gregory with regard to his triadology, christology, pneumatology, soteriology and the doctrine of uncreated energies as well as the mutual relationships between all of these.

Divine essence and energies

According to St Gregory Palamas, “there are three realities in God, namely, substance, energy and a Trinity of divine hypostases”,⁷ Three divine hypostases are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, equal in their nature, glory and power;⁸ divine substance, or essence, constitutes the common nature and perfect unity of Godhead of the Three,⁹ while divine energy is the eternal movement of the essence,¹⁰ encompassing the infinity of operations belonging evenly to every person of the Trinity,¹¹ Divine energy, or rather divine energies as per their innumerable multiplicity,¹² is the means by which God manifests Himself, first by the very act of creation, and next by allowing the creatures to share in His grace.

As God’s own movement, the energies emerge perpetually from divine substance as from their source and cause,¹³ being as eternal and uncreated as God’s essence itself.¹⁴ Sometimes, St Gregory mentions another distinction between divine powers and energies,¹⁵ the former being eternal and the latter constituting their application in reference to creation, according to which particular energies – like the actual act of creation as different from the ever-present creative power – can be said to have a beginning or an end.¹⁶ In general, however, Palamas equates power and energy in God,¹⁷ claiming instead that while all divine energies are uncreated, not all of them are eternal.

Being numerous and different from each other,¹⁸ divine operations allow God to act and reveal Himself in various ways, always staying the same, one Trinity. Moreover, as Palamas strongly underscores, all energies are nothing but God himself even if they are different from His simple essence,¹⁹ just as every single divine hypostasis

⁷ Gregory Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, R.E. Sinkewicz (ed.), Ontario 1988, c. 75, pp. 170–171.

⁸ *Idem*, *Discorsi dimostrativi I*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, E. Perrella (ed.), Milano 2003, c. 1, pp. 16–17.

⁹ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 113, pp. 212–213.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, c. 73, pp. 168–169.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, c. 114, pp. 214–215.

¹² *Ibidem*, c. 91, pp. 190–191.

¹³ *Ibidem*, c. 106, pp. 202–203.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, c. 92, pp. 190–191.

¹⁵ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 3.2.11, pp. 868–869.

¹⁶ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 130, pp. 234–235.

¹⁷ *Idem*, *Atti Divini*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, *op. cit.*, c. 24, pp. 1020–1021.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 130, pp. 234–235. For a concise discussion of different categories included in the Palamite concept of divine energies see D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, New York 2004, pp. 234–242.

¹⁹ Gregory Palamas, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 101–103, pp. 198–201. On divine simplicity in Palamas see Georgios Mantzaridis, *Simplicity of God according to St Gregory Palamas*, [in:] *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable – The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology*, C. Athanasopoulos (ed.), Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, pp. 19–27.

is God himself while being objectively distinguishable from the very same essence.²⁰ Therefore, every experience of a divine energy or participation therein is simultaneously a direct experience of God himself without ever approaching His substance, a reality absolutely remote and unattainable for all created beings.²¹

Unlike divine energies themselves, all their effects are created,²² or, to put it in other words, all created beings and phenomena are nothing but temporary works of uncreated operations. No creature can therefore be called a work of divine essence,²³ a term which can be used only for the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit from their common principle, that is from the Father.²⁴

Being the sole cause of creation, God's energies are also the only principle and basis of all good that can be found in it,²⁵ beginning with the very fact of existence of every real thing. Creative or demiurgic energies are also directly connected with the inner principles of all beings,²⁶ which are the paradigmatic models of all substances pre-existing as energies in God's own mind.²⁷ Divine energies are therefore the only means through which creation receives and preserves its own existence and essential attributes as well as is joined to the Trinity as its Creator and Sustainer. Similarly, any cognition of God is possible only via His energies,²⁸ as His essence cannot be approached or known by anyone but God Himself.

Consequently, being inaccessible both in an ontological and epistemological way, divine substance is absolutely unutterable,²⁹ including the impossibility to say it exists³⁰ or to call it properly by the name of "essence" and "substance".³¹ The only names that can be accurately used for it are those proper to the apophatic theology³² as, rather than stating what something is, they simply declare what it is not. Meanwhile, all positive divine names ascribed to God refer to his energies,³³ constituting the only channel to know and approach Him via participation.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, c. 113, pp. 212–213

²¹ *Ibidem*, c. 75, pp. 170–171.

²² *Idem*, *Atti...*, *op. cit.*, c. 23, pp. 1018–1019.

²³ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 143, pp. 248–249.

²⁴ *Idem*, *Discorsi dimostrativi I*, c. 14, pp. 42–43.

²⁵ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 34, pp. 116–119.

²⁶ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.3.44, pp. 700–701.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 3.2.24, pp. 888–889.

²⁸ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 82, pp. 178–181.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, c. 145, pp. 250–251.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, c. 78, pp. 174–175.

³¹ *Idem*, *Teofane*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, *op. cit.*, c. 17, pp. 1278–1279.

³² *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 106, pp. 200–203.

³³ *Ibidem*, c. 144, pp. 248–249.

Participation

St Gregory distinguishes between two types of participation,³⁴ one created and one uncreated. The first type of participation, proper to the whole created world, is comparable to the way a work of a craftsman participates in his design³⁵. Lacking any direct access to the thoughts of the craftsman and being different from them by its very nature, the handiwork is nonetheless their effect and, in some sense, it resembles them. Using a different metaphor, the same type of participation might be illustrated with the example of heat which, transmitted from the sun by the sun's rays to all things found on the surface of the earth, endures in them even when the sun sets and the rays are no longer present.³⁶ Participation understood in this way points, therefore, to the relationship between every creature and its Creator, as all things are created in accordance with their inner principle hidden in God's eternal design, being both similar to it and different as per their nature and temporary status. As long as a given thing exists it is, moreover, impossible for it to lose its natural association with God's creative energies, even if – as is possible for all rational beings – it decides to reject God by the liberty of its free will.

The second type of participation, being participation in the strictest sense of this term,³⁷ is proper only to the creatures endowed with mind,³⁸ namely to humans and angels, and can be compared to gold which glows red when put into fire. Being inside the flame, on the one hand, the metal does not change its nature into the essence of fire which surrounds it, and on the other, it gains properties such as its temperature or the aforementioned red glow.³⁹ Both these characteristics, belonging to gold as long as it is kept in the fire, quickly disappear once it is pulled out of the flame. Participation *sensu stricto* can be also illustrated by the above-mentioned metaphor of sun rays, this time focusing not on the heat brought by them, but rather on the light itself. Illuminating everything they fall upon, rendering all pure, transparent things similar to themselves and being seen solely by those in possession of healthy eyes, they may be active only as long as they physically reach the surface of the earth, leaving no trace of their former brilliance once they fade away.⁴⁰

Similarly, the second type of participation refers to those beings which, utilising their faculty of free will, are capable of accepting or rejecting divine grace. Everyone

³⁴ In truth, Palamas mentions at least four different concepts of participation, although the two discussed above are by far the most important ones. Among the other two, one indicates the ontological relationship between hypostases and their common nature (and is rejected by Palamas as an unacceptable meaning of the term "participation"), while another deals with the dependence of all divine energies on the energy of "absolute being". *Idem, Teofane*, c. 21, pp. 1288–1289; *idem, The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 88, pp. 186–187; or *Confutazioni di Acindino II*, [in:] *Dal Sovraessenziale all'essenza*, E. Perrella (ed.), Milano 2005, XI.43, pp. 150–151.

³⁵ *Idem, La partecipazione deificante*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, *op. cit.*, c. 14, pp. 1092–1093.

³⁶ *Idem, Unità e distinzione*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, *op. cit.*, c. 30, pp. 974–975.

³⁷ *Idem, La partecipazione...*, *op. cit.*, c. 10, pp. 1084–1085.

³⁸ *Idem, The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 38, pp. 124–125.

³⁹ *Idem, La partecipazione...*, *op. cit.*, c. 21, pp. 1102–1103.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

who agrees to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit becomes its participant,⁴¹ emerging as truly similar to God⁴² and sharing in His glory⁴³ and Divinity,⁴⁴ not according to essence, but to energy;⁴⁵ remaining whatever substance they were, they become deified through the union with God⁴⁶ and ascend to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity in the uncreated Light of Tabor, putting on the splendour of God's glory and becoming capable of acting in the power of the Spirit.

Participation in and union with God according to free will is the supreme gift communicated by the Holy Spirit, constituting the ultimate purpose of the Christian life. This mode of participation, infinitely superior to that naturally present in all creation, is nevertheless fully dependent on voluntarily remaining in the state of union with God. Those who lose it, at once also lose all related gifts, in return receiving only spiritual darkness, emptiness and death, like the fallen angels led by the Devil or Adam and Eve cast out of paradise.⁴⁷

Knowledge of God

In every rational being, the organ directly responsible for receiving the deifying energy is the mind⁴⁸ with its contemplative faculty – the eye of the soul,⁴⁹ which subsequently transmits the grace to all other constitutive elements of human⁵⁰ or angelic nature. In man, this process is hierarchical, beginning with the cognitive part of the soul and proceeding successively through its other parts to terminate in senses⁵¹ and body.⁵² Thereby, grace perfects every natural power, which, for the cognitive function of the mind means nothing other than endowing it with mystical knowledge.⁵³ Being the only knowledge possessed by holy angels,⁵⁴ this type of cognition is also present in the saints, who, while still living their mortal life, also have a normal, natural knowledge coming to the mind by means of senses and imagination.⁵⁵

⁴¹ *Idem*, *Dialogo d'un Ortodosso*, [in:] *Atto e Luce Divina*, E. Perrella (ed.), Milano 2003, c. 46, pp. 1212–1213.

⁴² *Idem*, *Teofane*, c. 29, pp. 1308–1309.

⁴³ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 39, pp. 126–127.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, c. 105, pp. 200–201.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, c. 69, pp. 164–165.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, c. 105, pp. 200–201.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, c. 39, pp. 126–127.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, *Vita di Pietro Athonita*, [in:] *Che cos'è l'Ortodossia*, *op. cit.*, c. 9, pp. 182–183.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.3.15, pp. 644–647.

⁵⁰ Robert E. Sinkewicz, *The Concept of Spiritual Perception in Gregory Palamas' First Triad in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, “Христианский Восток” 1999, vol. 1(7), pp. 385–386.

⁵¹ Gregory Palamas, *Triadi*, 2.3.33, pp. 432–433.

⁵² *Idem*, *Vita di Pietro...*, *op. cit.*, c. 19, pp. 194–195.

⁵³ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.3.17, pp. 648–649.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 1.3.5, pp. 372–373.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 15–17, pp. 98–101.

According to St Gregory, man is therefore capable of accessing two basic kinds of knowledge – one direct and supernatural, appearing in the mind through the mysterious work of divine grace, and one gradual and natural, gained by man on the basis of the sense perception and discursive reasoning, which can be parallelly split into another two types of knowledge.⁵⁶ This bipartition (or tripartition) of cognition also holds true with regard to various particular types of knowledge, including knowledge (but never comprehension⁵⁷) of God, although in this case, there can be no cognition of God proper to sense perception, for God is not a material object and, consequently, cannot be treated as such.

When dealing with the Palamite concept of the knowledge of God one needs to, therefore, begin with a fundamental distinction between the knowledge acquired by man via his senses and that received directly from God through His grace. This differentiation, however, needs to be supplemented with two additional categories arising from the specificity of cognition when applied to God. First, as Palamas puts it, knowledge of God gained by means of senses and reason has itself a twofold character, depending on the source from which it is drawn. On the one hand, this knowledge can be gained from the proper observation of the created world, on the other, it can be received through faith from the Christian Scriptures as well as the teachings of the Holy Fathers and the whole Tradition of the Church. Second, the participation of deifying grace, constituting a true and direct experience of God, tends to also be called knowledge and, thereby, can to some degree be treated as such.

Consequently, a systematic approach to various texts and ideas formulated by St Gregory Palamas allows one to distinguish four main kinds of knowledge of God present in his thought. These are: knowledge of God drawn from creation, Christian knowledge of God drawn from Scriptures and theology, mystical knowledge of God effectuated by grace, and the experience of this grace itself understood as knowledge transcending all cognition. These four concepts shall now be briefly discussed, focusing on their epistemic ground, method, religious prerequisites and the scope of knowledge about God which they offer.

Knowledge from creation

The knowledge of God from created beings⁵⁸ is, as its name implies, a basic cognition of God drawn solely from a properly understood study of the natural world, its elements, laws and phenomena. Although St Gregory does not go into much detail about it, he seems to identify the source of this knowledge with all beings composing the material world, subject to the perception of five human senses.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, c. 63, pp. 157–158.

⁵⁷ Comprehension (κατανόησις) suggests complete grasping of something, while knowledge, as a more general term, implies any kind of cognition, including a partial one. *Idem*, *Confutazioni...*, *op. cit.*, V, XI.18, pp. 412–413.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, *Seconda Lettera a Barlaam*, [in:] *Che cos'è l'Ortodossia*, *op. cit.*, c. 24, pp. 528–529.

The first step to obtain the knowledge of God from created beings consists, therefore, in the natural perception of the world around us, leading us to the apprehension of two crucial characteristics of the created reality. First, as St Gregory points out in many of his works, the whole creation exhibits a mysterious, all-encompassing harmony, manifesting the proper place and function of every single thing found in the universe as well as the orderly character of the whole, which can thus be correctly called the κόσμος.⁵⁹ As Palamas puts it, the perfectly coordinated coexistence of innumerable beings and events including many contradictory phenomena such as heat and cold, change and stability, movement and motionlessness, or falling and ascending, must imply the existence of some Creator,⁶⁰ simultaneously responsible for bringing everything into harmonious existence and upholding its well-balanced state:

For who, having reason and seeing [...] the harmony present in so many things, their permanent relationships and positions, substantial dispositions and arrangements, the indivisibility of the whole; who, by accepting all this into their mind, will not think of the One who so beautifully placed everything in its place and miraculously attuned it all together⁶¹?

The knowledge of God from created beings is therefore to be understood first and foremost as acknowledgement of His existence and creative energy, according to which the one God is also the “Cause of all beings (ὁ αἴτιος τῶν ὄντων)”.⁶² A similar conclusion can also be reached based on another fundamental truth perceived in the created world, namely the contingent character of its every element. Just as all particular things need a cause to exist, Palamas argues, so does the whole world,⁶³ this ultimate cause, however, cannot require a further principle of its own, lest we fall into a logical trap of *regressus ad infinitum*.

This first type of knowledge, however, is not limited to the recognition of God as truly existent (keeping in mind the aforementioned absolute transcendence of the divine essence) and Creator. Seeing all creation as the effect of God’s own creative actions, we can ascend from our knowledge of all good things and form opinions about God himself, owing to the necessary similarity between the cause and that which is caused.⁶⁴ Even although this reasoning cannot tell us anything about the divine nature as such, it may allow us to cognise various positive attributes correctly ascribed to God according to His energies, such as His being the supreme good, “or rather, goodness and a goodness which transcends itself”⁶⁵ as well as constituting the

⁵⁹ *Idem, The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 23, pp. 106–107.

⁶⁰ To be more precise, Palamas distinguishes between two stages leading to the knowledge of God from creatures. The first leads from created beings and phenomena to particular divine energies, while the second ascends from multiplicity of energies to the unity of its source, namely to the existence of one divine essence, i.e. one God. The former, already achieved in ancient times by the Greek sages, can be reached by anyone with their own mental capacity, while the latter requires God-given faith. *Idem, Confutazioni...*, *op. cit.*, IV, XIII.31–32, p. 430.

⁶¹ *Idem, Triadi*, 2.3.44, pp. 700–701.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 1.1.16, pp. 310–312.

⁶³ *Idem, The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 1, pp. 82–83.

⁶⁴ *Idem, Triadi*, 2.3.46, pp. 702–703.

⁶⁵ *Idem, The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 34, pp. 117–118.

absolute life, wisdom, eternity, bliss, unity, truth, and, in general, the form and being of everything that exists.⁶⁶ It must be noticed, however, that positive knowledge of God drawn from creation has also its limits, as God's perfect revelation has only become fulfilled in the theanthropic person of Christ, the incarnated Logos. Taking this into account, Palamas does not hesitate to call this type of knowledge imperfect and insecure in comparison with the understanding given through Jesus to all Christians.⁶⁷

The above-mentioned, cataphatic mode of conceiving of and speaking about God is also accompanied by elements typical of negative theology. By showing the similarity between the Creator and the images and effects of his actions, learning about God on the basis of beings will, according to St Gregory, also teach us about the insurmountable difference between the Creator and the creature, as everything we know about the world will show us precisely what God is certainly not.⁶⁸

When considered in their capacity to know God from creation, the natural faculties of human cognition such as sense perception and basic logical, predominantly inductive,⁶⁹ reasoning act as one of the eyes of the soul, directed towards divine glory and providence permeating all reality.⁷⁰ This faculty, however, cannot be effective without a certain moral and spiritual preparation. Following the great authors of the Greek Patristic tradition, Palamas sees an inherent connection between the state of living in sin, that is in spiritual uncleanness, and the proper functioning of all human nature, its epistemic powers included. Without the necessary prerequisite of conversion to God and adherence to His precepts, the noetic eye of the mind cannot see clearly, keeping the soul in the state of darkness as devoid of both the natural light of correct knowledge and the supernatural light of divine grace.

To see God through His creation one has to, therefore, enter the path of spiritual purification, available to them either by means of Christian doctrine and practice or simply owing to the inner voice of the consciousness, weakened yet never fully extinguished by sin.⁷¹ Only then is it possible to encounter the creation as the herald and angel of the Lord,⁷² manifesting Him and leading all to His cognition, clear examples of which are Abraham and Melchizedek.⁷³

Beginning with the perception of the created reality, the knowledge of God first discussed by us is simultaneously the knowledge of all beings or, to be more precise, the knowledge of the natural place and the function intended by God for every single thing. Thus, the study of the world proposed by Palamas is actually the study of the eternal "inner principles (αἰτιώδεις λόγοι)"⁷⁴ present in all substances and productive

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, c. 78, pp. 172–173.

⁶⁷ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.3.69, pp. 748–751.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 2.3.44, pp. 700–701.

⁶⁹ R. Swinburne, *Gregory Palamas and Our Knowledge of God*, "Studia Humana" 2014, vol. 3(1), p. 6.

⁷⁰ Gregory Palamas, *Triadi*, 2.3.15, pp. 644–645.

⁷¹ *Idem*, *The Homilies*, Ch. Veniamin (ed.), Waverly 2016, 3.7, p. 82.

⁷² *Idem*, *Triadi*, 1.1.16, pp. 312–313.

⁷³ *Idem*, *The Homilies*, 53.28, pp. 296.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.1.8, pp. 486–487.

of their essences, identical with the will of God with regard to every being and the divine demiurgic energies permeating all creation.⁷⁵

By encompassing the genuine cognition of beings, the knowledge of God from the created world is identified by Palamas with the true philosophy,⁷⁶ also called natural philosophy⁷⁷ or philosophy as such,⁷⁸ as contrasted with the erroneous philosophy of the Pagan Greeks.⁷⁹ Instead of equating demons with God and leading to idolatry, as St Gregory writes in reference to the Greek philosophical thought and practice understood through the lens of the post-Iamblichian Neoplatonism, this philosophy leads every man to recognise the universe as created by the one and only God as well as to use all things according to their divine intention by studying the principles of their creation.⁸⁰ The knowledge of God from created beings appears, therefore, to have not only a theoretical, but also a practical aspect, combining the acknowledgment of God's existence, providence and creative power with the art of utilising the creation, including one's own body and psychic faculties, in consonance with God's will and, consequently, His divine precepts.

Christian knowledge

The knowledge "proper to all Christians"⁸¹ is all that can be learned about God from the Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers. Given by God himself through his revelation, this knowledge, also called theology and contemplation (θεωρία),⁸² constitutes a necessary prerequisite to salvation and the antidote to the "unacceptable ignorance of God and the divine dogmas".⁸³

First of all, it encompasses the recognition of God's existence as well as the cognition of all fundamental attributes of God, proper to both the positive (kataphatic) and the negative (apophatic) theologies. As Palamas himself puts it when speaking about the "teaching of the Spirit" in the twenty first chapter of his *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*:

For this teaching has taught us that God alone is true being, eternal being and immutable being, that he neither received being out of non-being nor returns to non-being, and that he is trihypostatic and omnipotent.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 1.1.16, pp. 312–313.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 1.1.3, pp. 278–279.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 1.1.16, pp. 310–311.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 1.1.14, pp. 306–307.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 2.1.8, pp. 486–487.

⁸¹ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 29, pp. 112–113.

⁸² *Idem*, *Triads*, 1.3.15, pp. 394–395.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 1.1.4, pp. 280–281.

⁸⁴ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 21, pp. 102–105.

Therefore, on the one hand, the Christian knowledge of God incorporates the cognition of God formed on the basis of created beings, on the other hand, however, it transcends it by pointing out truths available only through the Scriptural revelation, such as the dogma of the Trinity alluded to in the fragment above.

Next, this type of knowledge also deals with the whole world as God's creation. Palamas seems to refer here primarily to the concept of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, thus rejecting the thesis of the existence of eternal matter, derived from Greek philosophy.⁸⁵ On this occasion, one should again take into account the teaching about the order and harmony prevailing in the world, which are the testimony of the creative act attributed exclusively to God Himself.

Theological knowledge about the world also includes, by necessity, knowledge about man, and especially about his unique "place before God".⁸⁶ It was only human nature, St Gregory claims, that was made in the image and likeness of God, and among all the creatures only the human soul was "able to be united with God in a single hypostasis".⁸⁷ Moreover, the Christian teaching does not allow ascribing any sort of rationality to other creatures except for angels⁸⁸ – our fellow servants of God who also possess His image, although in a way less perfect than that found in man.⁸⁹ The acknowledgment of human dignity must also be followed by the knowledge of one's own weakness, as without it no-one will start to seek the healing, thereby approaching the "light of knowledge" and receiving the "true wisdom".⁹⁰

Without going into too many details of the Palamite doctrine, suffice to say that theological knowledge generally applies to the entire teaching of the Orthodox Church, based on the words of the Prophets, Apostles and Jesus himself recorded in the Bible, as well as on the teachings of the Holy Fathers given by Tradition. As St Gregory states:

Salvific perfection in matters of knowledge and dogma consists in thinking the same as the Prophets, the Apostles, and generally all the Fathers by whom, as is attested, the Holy Spirit spoke of God and His creatures.⁹¹

Christian knowledge is therefore first and foremost "knowledge drawn from the Scriptures"⁹² by studying them which, according to St Gregory, was already prescribed by Christ himself.⁹³ This, however, requires faith, empowering one to ascend beyond the carnal logic of the Greek philosophers and to wholeheartedly accept divine works performed in miraculous ways. The attitude of faith, as Palamas understands it, does not stand in opposition to the mind and its cognition: "faith is not madness,

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, c. 26, pp. 108–111.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, c. 24, pp. 106–109.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, c. 26–27, pp. 108–113.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, c. 39, pp. 126–127.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, c. 29, pp. 112–113.

⁹¹ *Idem, Triadi*, 2.1.42, pp. 550–551.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 2.1.8, pp. 486–487.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 2.1.43, pp. 552–553.

but rather knowledge transcending all reasoning”.⁹⁴ Shared by all Christians, faith constitutes the source of knowledge common to all disciples of Christ, including those considered uneducated.⁹⁵ With this in mind, the study of the Scriptures should probably be understood in a broader sense, including, for example, mystagogical catechesis or homiletic explanation of biblical pericopes.

However, acquiring theological knowledge is not limited to faithfully repeating the statements found in the Christian Bible or in the writings of the Church Fathers. As Palamas argues in his letters to Barlaam and Akindynos, truths concerning God and His dogmas can also be dealt with using properly understood logical tools such as abstraction or demonstration,⁹⁶ in which the theses found in the Scriptures serve as principles and premises.⁹⁷ Although such reasoning cannot lead us into the discovery of anything new about God – as all salvific knowledge has already been revealed to the Apostles and is being preserved by the Tradition of the Church – it can be very helpful in instructing others in matters of faith or exhibiting errors of heretical ideas.⁹⁸ Still, such tools cannot be applied to the divine dogmas in an unrestricted and autonomous way – even if their use is allowed, as Palamas states, it must always be accompanied by the purity of mind and the grace of the Holy Spirit, “which is the only key to the Holy Scriptures”.⁹⁹

Although all theological knowledge is drawn from the holy and inspired authors, it cannot be equated with their wisdom, rather being something much inferior to it.¹⁰⁰ In order to show this difference, St. Gregory uses the image of an eye looking at the sun or the moon; for as the eye, receiving its rays, is still far from becoming the heavenly body itself, so also whoever knows the writings of the prophets does not yet become one of them.¹⁰¹

Knowledge taken from the Holy Scriptures is described by Palamas as that which is perfect and “requires no practice or numerous toils for its perfection”.¹⁰² As doctrinal knowledge, it provides a certain access to the truth as well as the purification and salvation of the soul ensuing from it. Without the need for any supplementation as

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 2.3.43, pp. 696–697.

⁹⁵ *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 29, pp. 112–113.

⁹⁶ *Idem*, *Seconda Lettera...*, *op. cit.*, c. 19–22, pp. 522–527. St. Gregory Palamas has formed a detailed view of how the classical Aristotelian logic can and should be properly applied to theological matters, although the precise account of his position as regards this issue goes beyond the scope of this article. For the discussion on this topic see R. E. Sinkewicz, *Barlaam and Knowledge of God*, “Medieval Studies” 1982, vol. 44, pp. 181–242; K. Ierodiakonou, *The Anti-Logical Movement in the Fourteenth Century*, [in:] *eadem*, *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, New York 2002, pp. 219–235; and Constantinos Athanasopoulos, *Demonstration (Απόδειξις) and Its Problems for St Gregory Palamas: Some Neglected Aristotelian Aspects of St Gregory Palamas' Philosophy and Theology*, [in:] *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy*, M. Knezevic (ed.), Alhambra 2015, pp. 361–374.

⁹⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Seconda Lettera...*, *op. cit.*, c. 38–39, pp. 544–547.

⁹⁸ *Idem*, *Prima Lettera ad Acindino*, [in:] *Che cos'è l'Ortodossia*, *op. cit.*, c. 13, pp. 418–419.

⁹⁹ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.1.6, pp. 482–483.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 2.1.8, pp. 486–487.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 2.1.7, pp. 484–485.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 2.1.43, pp. 552–553.

that which knows no deficiency, Christian knowledge should be, nevertheless, combined with a “practical discernment”¹⁰³ and, consequently, a fitting praxis:

Do you understand that knowledge alone is of no use? And why should I speak of knowledge related to practical things, or of knowing the visible or invisible world; for even the knowledge of God who created all these things, if it is alone, will not be able to bring any benefit.¹⁰⁴

Not unlike Pagan Greek philosophy, theological knowledge becomes a source of pride for those who do not conjoin it with the proper practice of life.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, as it follows from Palamas’ own words, the perfecting and salvific aspect of the truth is substantiated not so much by knowledge itself but rather as a result of the fulfilment of God’s commandments,¹⁰⁶ witnessing the inadequacy of knowledge which, being based on faith and the Holy Scriptures, is nonetheless devoid of practical fulfillment. As a counterbalance, however, one must admit that the practical knowledge and true wisdom mentioned above are themselves conditioned and initiated by the knowledge of the Christian doctrine, which, after all, teaches not only about God’s own existence and attributes but also about His will and the proper way to carry it out.

Spiritual wisdom

Spiritual wisdom¹⁰⁷ and immaterial knowledge¹⁰⁸ constitute the proper and immediate cognition of God, acquired as one of the fruits of participation in the deifying divine energies. As contemplation *par excellence*,¹⁰⁹ it encompasses all that can be known about God in a simple and unitary way,¹¹⁰ including the scope of both of the above-mentioned types of knowledge. It is therefore, first of all, a certain cognition of God’s existence as well as of His kataphatic and apophatic attributes, described concisely as “knowledge of God and divine dogmas”.¹¹¹ Simultaneously, it also incorporates the true knowledge about man and all creation as far as it regards their relationship with God the Creator and is necessary for human salvation.¹¹² Containing all of the above, however, immaterial wisdom is not limited to its inferior counterparts, for it also comprises a mystical knowledge of God’s mysteries,¹¹³ often impossible to be expressed by words or to be passed on to those who lack such an experience. Moreover, it allows the chosen to comprehend the very nature, or the inner principles,

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 1.1.9, pp. 292–293.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 1.1.4, pp. 280–281.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 1.1.9, pp. 292–297.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 1.3.5, pp. 372–373.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 2.3.49, pp. 708–709.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.3.5, pp. 372–373.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, 1.1.4, pp. 280–281.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, 2.1.5, pp. 482–483.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 1.1.7, pp. 288–289.

of all created beings at once, which according to Palamas, occurred to St. Benedict of Nursia through an all-encompassing ray of divine Light.¹¹⁴

Shared by all Prophets, Apostles and Holy Fathers, true spiritual knowledge is the original source of their teachings, contained in the Holy Scriptures of the Orthodox Church. It is the wisdom of inspired authors, through which one can learn their words even without ever reading their actual texts. For St Gregory himself, the most prominent example of such a grace was St John the Baptist who, living in the desert from a very young age and being an uneducated man, nevertheless knew the Scriptures by means of an inner, mystical cognition.¹¹⁵ Spiritual knowledge was also the wisdom of Christ himself who, constituting according to his Divinity the eternal source of all knowledge and being Wisdom itself,¹¹⁶ possessed it naturally via His hypostatic union.

Unlike the cognition drawn from created beings or Christian Scriptures, spiritual wisdom is not based upon any preliminary perception, natural observation or human means of transmitting knowledge. Rather, it is directly caused by the divine grace itself, giving itself to those who, having purified themselves of sinful passions through partaking of the sacraments and practice of the commandments, approach God with faith, prayer, humility and love.¹¹⁷ Although, by its very nature, it is not conditioned by any of the aforementioned types of knowledge, true wisdom can, therefore, nonetheless be said to depend on them externally as far as one has to be somehow initiated into the Christian path of spiritual purification to become worthy of this sacred gift.

This purification, as Palamas puts it, begins with the rejection of the false Greek philosophy and its malicious doctrines:

The beginning of wisdom is to possess enough of it to separate the highly useful, heavenly and spiritual wisdom which goes from God and to God, and which reveals as God-like those, who acquire it, from the mundane, useless and earthly wisdom, and to prefer the former to the latter.¹¹⁸

The above commendation to reject Greek knowledge is, however, directed not so much against various sciences postulated by secular philosophers, but rather against attempts to make them an object of contemplation and an end in itself.¹¹⁹ Such a way of practising “vain philosophy”¹²⁰ occupies the soul with unnecessary considerations, thereby distancing it from that which properly inaugurates the process of gaining “spiritual wisdom”,¹²¹ i.e. from the fear of God. According to St. Gregory, it is pre-

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 1.3.22, pp. 408–409.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 2.1.43, pp. 552–553.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, *Tre capitoli sulla preghiera*, [in:] *Che cos'è l'Ortodossia*, *op. cit.*, c. 1, pp. 168–169. More on the inherent connection between true knowledge of God and the practice of Christian life in Melchisedec of St John the Baptist's Monastery, *The Indisputable Wisdom of the Holy Spirit*, [in:] *Triune God...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–18.

¹¹⁸ Gregory Palamas, *Triadi*, 1.1.2, pp. 276–277.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 1.1.12, pp. 300–303.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.1.7, pp. 288–289.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, 1.1.9, pp. 292–297.

cisely this attitude that constitutes the right beginning of the “divine wisdom and contemplation”, for the fear of God, being unable to “coexist with anything else, having liberated the soul from everything and having smoothed it out with prayer, makes it into a tablet ready to be written in the graces of the Spirit”.¹²² Only then can the soul proceed to the subsequent stages of the spiritual ascent, consisting in following divine precepts, fulfilling God’s will and practising pure prayer, i.e. the hesychastic prayer of heart, together with various forms of repentance and asceticism as prescribed by the Holy Fathers and the tradition of the Church.

Although the aforementioned practices characteristic of the Orthodox monastic life can be all treated as proper methods or prerequisites of obtaining divine wisdom, it should be noted once again, however, that they do not constitute its real source. Immaterial wisdom, unlike purely human acts and dispositions, is a spiritual gift – i.e. the fruit of the grace of the Holy Spirit – which, as a supernatural reality, cannot be attained by natural effort and endeavour.¹²³ This statement, however, does not in any way invalidate the integral relationship between human activities and the energies of the Holy Trinity; for a loving God does not refrain from bestowing his favours to those who ask for them in prayer and who are able to receive them through the practice of a godly life.

Spiritual knowledge is therefore a divine gift that accompanies man on the path of deification and testifies to the more and more advanced process of healing one’s own human nature:

But we also know that the fulfilment of the commandments of God gives true knowledge, since it is through this that the soul gains health. How could a rational soul be healthy, if it is sick in its cognitive faculty? So we know that the commandments of God also grant knowledge.¹²⁴

Understanding spiritual knowledge as a consequence of the experience of divine energies, St Gregory pays much attention to making an unequivocal distinction between these two realities. For just as all knowledge is necessarily different from and secondary to the experience that generates it, so possessing the light of contemplation must be truly distinguished from the reception of the light of grace, identified by Palamas with a progressively advancing participation in God’s deifying power and with the vision of the uncreated Tabor Light.¹²⁵

Thoroughly grounded in spiritual practice and experience, immaterial wisdom constitutes the most certain and immutable knowledge, which cannot be undermined by any discursive arguments.¹²⁶ It is also the most useful and salvific knowledge,¹²⁷ because, teaching how to act in accordance with God’s will, it offers an infallible means of receiving God’s grace, which is the source not only of this very wisdom, but also of the process of deification and salvation embracing the whole human being.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 1.1.22, pp. 322–323.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 2.3.17, pp. 648–649.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, 1.3.42, pp. 450–451.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, 1.3.13, pp. 390–391.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, 2.1.5, pp. 482–483.

Vision of Tabor Light

Vision of the uncreated Light of Tabor constitutes the very experience of the mystical union with God and participation in His glory. Although sometimes referred to as knowledge, this illumination can only be called so improperly,¹²⁸ for it is rather the source of knowledge and “ignorance transcending knowledge”.¹²⁹ To be precise, one has to admit that the “illumination is not, by any means, knowledge or virtue, transcending all human virtue and knowledge”,¹³⁰ just as the darkness opposed to it cannot be simply identified with a lack of understanding.¹³¹

Nevertheless, St Gregory does not hesitate to use many epistemic metaphors while speaking about this phenomenon, such as the aforementioned contemplation (θεωρία),¹³² sight (ὄρασις),¹³³ vision (θέα),¹³⁴ seeing God (θεοπτία),¹³⁵ illumination (φωτισμός),¹³⁶ splendour (λαμπρότης),¹³⁷ theophany (θεοφάνεια)¹³⁸ or even tasting (γεῦσις).¹³⁹

Describing the vision of uncreated Light by means of categories usually associated with some kind of cognition or knowledge results, patently, from an inherent relationship between these two – supernatural illumination is the source and cause of spiritual wisdom and, thereby, of all theology, manifesting divine truths and mysteries directly to the mind. It is nonetheless as different from knowledge as all experience naturally differs from the cognition that follows from it, or as possessing something differs from merely thinking about it.¹⁴⁰ When referring to the supreme vision of divine glory, “seeing God” must not be understood as some sort of intellectual state or activity, even though, as Palamas mentions, the verb “to see” can indeed be used metaphorically to indicate mental cognition in other contexts.¹⁴¹

This gift of supernatural ecstasy is bestowed upon those who have reached the state of true, spiritual purity¹⁴² via the means set forth in the Gospel and the writings

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*, 2.3.33, pp. 676–677.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, 1.3.21, pp. 406–409.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.3.40, pp. 446–447.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, 1.3.10, pp. 384–385.

¹³² *Ibidem*, 1.3.42, pp. 450–451.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, 1.3.4, pp. 368–371.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, 1.3.17, pp. 398–401.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, 1.3.26, pp. 418–419.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.3.14, pp. 642–643.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, 1.3.5, pp. 372–373.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, 1.3.4, pp. 370–371.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, 1.3.42, pp. 450–451.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.3.34, pp. 434–435. It is worth noticing that, in a certain sense, not only divine essence but also energies are beyond knowledge as, according to Palamas, the mind participating in divine illumination is incapable of cognitively grasping the nature of its own mystical experience.

¹⁴¹ *Idem*, *Confutazioni...*, *op. cit.*, V, III.7, pp. 482–483 or IV.11, pp. 488–489. One may, for example, speak about “seeing God” from His creatures, indicating nothing but the first type of knowledge of God discussed above.

¹⁴² *Idem*, *The Homilies*, 53.51, p. 328.

of the Church Fathers.¹⁴³ Following the whole Patristic tradition as interpreted by the hesychasts, Palamas understands the path of purification to begin with the mystery of baptism,¹⁴⁴ through which one becomes joined to Christ and His Mystical Body, i.e. the Church. Then, a life focused on the practice of divine virtues and commandments must ensue,¹⁴⁵ intrinsically linked with participation in the other mysteries of the Church, first and foremost in the Eucharist,¹⁴⁶ as well as with ascesis and continuous prayer.¹⁴⁷

The necessary co-presence of all the above elements in Christian life has been consequently taught by St Gregory and his fellow hesychasts not only to their monastic brethren, but also to lay people, who, according to Palamas, were equally called to holiness and divine illumination. This, however, could not be achieved without compunction and purification of the νοῦς, the centre of the human being identified in the spiritual context with the heart – καρδιά,¹⁴⁸ carried out principally by the aforementioned means of continuous ascetical struggle and the unceasing prayer of the heart.¹⁴⁹ Only then can the mind enter into its most proper triadic energy of guarding itself, being guarded by itself and performing prayer,¹⁵⁰ thereby freely¹⁵¹ opening itself to accept the free-given¹⁵² grace of divine manifestation and deification.

Even this highest energy of the mind, however, must eventually stop to allow for the ineffable union with God to happen,¹⁵³ as that occurs only by an absolute cessation of all activities, both sensual and mental.¹⁵⁴ Still, this very cessation does not yet constitute the mystical experience itself, rather being its direct context and ultimate prerequisite.¹⁵⁵

Crucially for Palamas, the grace of supernatural contemplation granted to man encompasses all the human being, allowing both soul and body¹⁵⁶ to participate

¹⁴³ E.g. see numerous references to the authority of the Fathers in Palamas' most important ascetical work, *To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia*, [in:] *The Philokalia*, G.E.H. Palmer, Ph. Sherrard, K. Ware (eds.), vol. IV, pp. 293–322.

¹⁴⁴ *Idem*, *The Homilies*, 16.34, p. 470.

¹⁴⁵ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 1.3.18, pp. 400–401.

¹⁴⁶ *Idem*, *The Homilies*, 3.38, p. 442 and 60.7, p. 516. See S. Yangazoglou, *Eucharist and Ascesis: Eucharistic and Therapeutic Ecclesiology in the Theology of St. Gregory Palamas*, [in:] *Triune...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–83.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Tre capitoli...*, *op. cit.*, c. 3, pp. 170–173.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁹ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.1.30, pp. 522–525.

¹⁵⁰ *Idem*, *Tre capitoli...*, *op. cit.*, c. 2, pp. 170–171.

¹⁵¹ The uncreated participation in divine grace is available exclusively to the rational beings, as they are the only creatures to possess free will. Palamas often underscores the fundamental role of freedom in spiritual life. E.g. *Idem*, *The One Hundred...*, *op. cit.*, c. 33, pp. 116–117; c. 41, pp. 130–31; c. 78, p. 172–173.

¹⁵² Being omnipotent, God works in creation and actualises his energies as He pleases. *Ibidem*, c. 133, pp. 238–239.

¹⁵³ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.2.15, pp. 586–587.

¹⁵⁴ *Idem*, *Teofane*, c. 16, pp. 1276–1277.

¹⁵⁵ *Idem*, *Triadi*, 1.3.17, pp. 400–401.

¹⁵⁶ Appreciation of the body in the context of deification is one of the key features of Palamite anthropology and soteriology. See Demetrios Harper, *Becoming Homotheos: St. Gregory Palamas' Eschatology of Body*, [in:] *Triune...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–247.

accordingly in God's glory. Having suppressed their own, created energies, all natural faculties are then filled with the Holy Spirit, who, as if taking their place, becomes by His grace an organ of perceiving that which is Invisible.¹⁵⁷ Belonging neither to the order of mind nor to that of senses, the mystical ecstasy¹⁵⁸ is often described by St Gregory by means of oxymorons such as "mental (noeric¹⁵⁹) sense perception".¹⁶⁰

In this way, saints are raised to the contemplation of God himself and the mind gets access to the unutterable. To avoid any misunderstandings, however, it is vital to remember once again that this experience is nothing but the experience of God's energies, as, according to the Palamite teaching, the essence of God is unconditionally inaccessible and imparticipable.

Supernatural illumination, having its temporary¹⁶¹ and often barely perceptible beginning in mortal life,¹⁶² has no end. It is the revelation of God, identical to the proper reward of the saved after the resurrection – the Kingdom of God.¹⁶³ Thus, the vision of the Uncreated Light – transcending all theoretical and practical knowledge – is also the proper and final goal of all cognition and human activity:

The end of spiritual contemplation is a deposit of the world to come, ignorance above knowledge and knowledge above concept, mysterious participation and inexpressible vision of the Mysterious, the mystical and ineffable contemplation and tasting of the eternal Light.¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

In his numerous writings, St Gregory Palamas presents us with a developed view on various ways of knowing God, indicating different sources and methods through which one can come to this blessed cognition. As has been shown, the question of knowledge of God is inherently connected to the central ideas of Palamite teaching, including the doctrines of objective distinction between divine essence and energy, of two modes of participation, or of deification through God's grace understood as the ultimate purpose of Christian life. Writing about the knowledge of God, St Gregory distinguished between several possible meanings of this expression, consistently pointing out four main types of cognition of God. These are: knowledge of God drawn from creation, Christian knowledge gained from Scripture and Tradition, mystical knowledge understood as wisdom, and the deifying vision of Light of Tabor, which is called knowledge only in an improper sense of this word. Each of these

¹⁵⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Triadi*, 1.3.37, pp. 420–421.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 2.3.35, pp. 680–681.

¹⁵⁹ "Noeric", as opposed to "noetic", refers directly to the mind, i.e. to the νοῦς, rather than to its natural mental activity, i.e. to its νόησις.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 1.3.20, pp. 404–405.

¹⁶¹ Experience of union with God in present life, although possible, cannot happen often and can only last for a short time. *Idem*, *Triadi*, 2.2.17, pp. 590–591.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, 2.3.18, pp. 652–653.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*, 1.3.42, pp. 450–451.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

concepts has been discussed, showing how knowledge of God is seen by Palamas as both a starting point and a crowning achievement of Christian life. It begins as an acknowledgment of God's existence and his most basic attributes and ends as the true vision and union with God – an experience transcending all cognition. It is necessary to point out, however, that the topics discussed in the article require further, in-depth studies, analysing the problem from philological and historical perspectives.

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