

THE DIVINE LIGHT. THE SIGHT AND EXPERIENCE OF IT IN GREGORY PALAMAS THEOLOGY*

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Abstract: *In the paper, the authors focused Gregory Palamas theology regarding the divine light which he had developed during the hesychast controversy that occurred in the 14th century. Palamas entered in an intellectual debate with his adversary Barlaam with the purpose of explaining to him the fact that the man could experience a union with God and thus see the divine light, different from any other physical light or light source. This divine light represents the topic of the paper. Our research begun with reviewing theological literature of contemporary theologians like Dumitru Stăniloae, John Meyendorff, Patrícia Calvário or Florin T. Tomoiagă which had previously studied and spoke about Palamas theology. Through the paper the authors show and explain what divine light is, its apophatic character and what are the means through which it could be seen. They concluded that the uncreated light is beyond words and transcend earthly realm being knowable and perceptible only in relation with God mediated by the grace of the Holy Spirit.*

Keywords: Gregory Palamas, divine light, apophatic theology, prayer.

Can man unite with the Divine Trinity from this earthly life? That was the major question which triggered the hesychast controversy of the 14th century. The discussions that this question arose were due to the fact that it implies that the created entity, the material man would enter in a unity connection with the uncreated incorporeal Creator. The archbishop of Thessaloniki, Gregory Palamas shed light on this apparently complicated contradiction by appealing to the continual ministry of the Holy Spirit in Christ's Church. Having in mind the words from 2 Pt 1, 4: „Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature”, Palamas indicates that humans could become gods.¹ The essence of God remains unknowable to humans but his uncreated energies that radiate from within his essence

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¹ We have to be cautious though about this term. It never meant breaching the absolute ontological distinction between God and his creation. The man becomes god only because God wills it.

overflow over the world offering the possibility for man to unite with his Creator and thus participating genuinely to God's essence or nature.²

It is this action of unifying that confers the possibility man to see the divine light. Being together with God the man stops seeing with his own eyes and receives by graces spiritual eyes which unlockes new possibilities to the mind to contemplate. But in order for the spiritual eyes and the mind to be compatible in this new reality shown by the divine light, the mind must be cleansed and engulfed by the energy of God's light. Only after this spiritual process the mind being erased from transgressions it can truly overcome the limitations of thinking, contemplating and experiencing. This new spiritual mind is enhanced by God in its sensible capabilities in order to see and feel his divine light that is a uninterrupted togetherness with the Creator.³

We had made several references concerning Gregory Palamas in our previous studies⁴ but the present study innovates in terms of dealing solely with his theology of the light. The core stone of his writings that we used as a starting point is Palamas treaty *On the Divine Light* against Barlaam⁵ and several works regarding biographical data. Dumitru Stăniloae, John Meyendorf and Ioan I. Ică jr are some of the theologians for which Gregory Palamas occupies a central interest that was manifested in translations of some of his work and summing introductions to his life and work. It was inevitable that in the process to encounter the divine light theology so they analyzed it and further presented it in their works. Dumitru Stăniloae underlines the closeness between seeing the light and being in union with God. The light means

² See Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama. Cu patru tratate traduse*, București, Scripta, 1993, pp. 65-78.

³ John Meyendorff, *O introducere în studiul vieții și operei Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, trans. by Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, București, Nemira, 2014, pp. 344-349.

⁴ Ioan Chirilă, „Întru lumina Ta vom vedea lumină (Ps 35,9)-despre lumină și taina întinericului în care se află Dumnezeu (Ieș 20,21)”, in „*Voi pune înaintea Ierusalimul, ca început al bucuriei mele*”. In *Honorem Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan la împlinirea vârstei de 80 ani*, eds. Aurel Pavel and Nicolae Chifăr, Sibiu, Astra Museum, 2018, pp. 214-237; Ioan Chirilă, Stelian Pașca-Tușa, Ioan Popa-Bota, Claudia-Cosmina Trif, „Light-Icon/stained glass-illumination”, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, XVII, 50, (2018), pp. 96-108; Ioan Chirilă, „Veniți să umblăm în lumina Domnului” (Is 2,5)-discursul isaian despre lumina dumnezeiască”, in *In honorem pr. prof. univ. dr. Vasile Stanciu*, ed. Daniel Mocanu, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2018, pp. 91-107; Pașca-Tușa Stelian, „Iconizarea serafimilor-reperle biblice și patristice care au stat la baza realizării acestei morfologii iconice și a mesajului ei teologic”, in *In honorem pr. prof. univ. dr. Vasile Stanciu*, pp. 337-345.

⁵ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, trans. by Dumitru Stăniloae, București, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1977, pp. 263-372.

unity and the unity with the light enables the seeing.⁶ John Meyendorff points to the character of the light as being a gift that humans receive as a consequence of their elevation.⁷ Ioan I. Ică jr. merges the aforementioned theologians perspectives and shows interest in canonical procedures regarding Palamas.⁸ We have to mention some of the newest studies about Palamas; one of Patrícia Calvário: „Theosis and the Metaphysics of Light of Gregory Palamas”⁹ and the other of T. Tomoioagă: „The vision of Divine Light in Saint Gregory Palamas’s Theology”.¹⁰ Citing biblical and Eastern Church Fathers writings both texts conclude that seeing God is the ultimate experience of the divine in Palama’s theology. Besides these two studies mentioned Dimitrios Chr. Koukourdinou comes with another one which aims (and succeeds) to prove that the concept of light being understood in Palama’s vocabulary is based on Dionysius the Areopagite’s corpus. This shows the continuity with and the membership of Palamas among the Eastern Church Fathers like Maximus the Confessor or Symeon the New Theologian.¹¹

The present paper aims to highlight what does the concept of light mean in Gregory Palama’s theology, its nature and what are the means for the man in order to be able to see it. We will underline and analyze the main ideas extracted from Palama’s treaty *On the Divine Light* written against Barlaam. Our primary objective is not a mere scholastic display of what the light is but rather pointing to its spiritual experience importance using as methodology the reasoning of the Eastern Church Fathers whom spiritual interpretative skills we tried to internalize. The main argument of such spiritual approach is that Palamas himself never had thought about his treaty as a mere scholastic theological research on the light. The intention was to address the spiritual implications as a consequence of the possibility to experience this light in believers’ life.

⁶ D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura*, p. 58.

⁷ J. Meyendorff, *O introducere*, p. 347.

⁸ Sf. Grigorie Palama, *Scrieri I. Tomosuri dogmatice-viața-slujba*, trans. by Ioan I. Ică jr, Sibiu, Deisis, 2009; Idem, *Scrieri II. Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul-prototipuri ale vieții isihaste și alte scrieri duhovnicești*, trans. by Ioan I. Ică jr, Sibiu, Deisis, 2005.

⁹ Patrícia Calvário, „Theosis and the Metaphysics of Light of Gregory Palamas”, in *Analele Universității București*, LXVII, 1, (2018), pp. 227-234.

¹⁰ Florin T. Tomoioagă, „The vision of Divine Light in Saint Gregory Palamas’s Theology”, in *Acta Teologica*, XXXV, 2, (2015), pp. 142-153

¹¹ https://www.academia.edu/30353469/_Light_as_an_Orthodox_Christian_concept_Gregory_Palamas_and_the_understanding_of_Divine_Light_in_the_Corpus_Dionysiacum, accessed in: 13.02.2019.

What the divine light is

The core stone of the theological thought and writings of Saint Gregory Palamas regarding the heavenly light starts with the unquestionable assumption that God does not represent anything that falls under the influence of senses and that is a universal truth. In order to strengthen his thesis, developed the term Super-God having in mind not only the fact that God is beyond any possible affirmation meaning that His existence could not be encircled by any positive definition but He stays beyond any negation that mind could perceive. Palamas sees these as universal thrust available in any culture/religion. Christians, persans or hindu regardless, they all know that is not part of this earthly, corrupt existence.¹²

Saint Gregory Palamas augmented his theological arguments and developed terms or concepts in order to describe what God *is not* as part of a polemical dialogue with another thinker of his era, namely Barlaam. He believed and preached about the possibility to fully understand God's nature by a mental effort of speculation. Barlaam was convinced that purity implies theoretical philosophy knowledge.¹³ In this respect one has to purify himself in order to know God; purifying meaning in this context the fulfillment of philosophical knowledge. The uneducated was impure. For Palamas on the other hand purity means cleanness from passions. That process does not involve knowledge or any philosophical teaching. What Palamas underline are the basic assumptions of **Eastern Church Fathers**.¹⁴ Mind could be subjected to corruption and pride which led to ignorance or even arrogance but honest heart is the proper or the sole manner in which one could dwell in God's revealed presence.

Palamas says that the divine light is the essence of God, it is life and reason. More than that it is a mirror image of the human mind's nature. The Eastern Tradition does not contradict natural revelation which propels man closer to God through man's deduction of divine existence from contemplating nature's wonders and perfections. This, the Fathers say is the first step in experiencing God. In all cases though God remains inaccessible in His essence and our experiencing of His

¹² Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 266.

¹³ J. Meyendorff, *O introducere*, p. 102.

¹⁴ Gregory Palamas borrow theological ideas from Eastern Church Father like: Dionysius the Areopagite, Macarius the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Maximus the Confessor or Symeon the New Theologian. Our study focuses solely on Palamas teology, the other Father being just mentioned. Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, pp. 266-270.

light is limited according to our nature and contemplation power. Every man, again, regardless of their culture/religion know God through His light for „*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*” (John 1, 1).

Speaking about this divine light, Saint Gregory Palamas mentions in the first place what it is not: dimensional/spatial, perceptive physically, nor it is govern by physics/optic laws. Any theory that could imply that the divine light is in some aspect material or sensitive is completely rejected. It is intelligible, incorporeal not overshadowed by matter. The Spirit represents the source of this light whom ministry and power could not be comprehended by mind. Having said that the Holy Spirit is its source, that does not mean that the divine light exists only through him. The Father and The Son also are equally engaged in light’s existence.¹⁵

One divine light experience example from the New Testament is identified in the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. The evangelist Matthew describes this event in the following words: „*His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light*” (Mt 17, 2). The light was the instrument through which Jesus had revealed himself as the true God. But that light was no ordinary one although its brightness was so powerfull. Its divine feature do not reside in that external brightness manifestation but rather in the personal nature that it has. Peter experienced a personal light for he heard words coming from the bright cloud. The fact that Peter heard the bright cloud is important for revealing the divine nature of the light for it surpasses the natural function of ordinary light for the fact that it shines the hearing. Saint **Symeon the New Theologian** interpreting the personal nature of the divine light concluded that it was the hypostais of the Son which is manifested through it that makes the light a personal one. In order for the Taboric light to shine in our hearts just like Peter lived to experience one has to purrify his heart from transgressions that opacitate it impeding the light to penetrate his essence. Once the divine light do penetrate our soul’s window it becomes a perpetual need for that kind of divine presence within us. Peter too never wanted to leave that place after encountering the light. No other light or light source could equate the divine light because they are intelligible and created thus being subjected to the laws of creation which is not the case for the uncreated divine light.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura*, p. 56.

¹⁶ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 289. For a more detailed perspective regarding the transfiguration of Jesus according to Gregoy Palamas, see Patrícia

The Three Holy Hierarch equate this light as divinity. It was the divinity that had shown its flashes on Mount Tabor. Based on their assumptions, Gregory Palamas develops a new christological dimension by coupling the divine light with the human nature assumed by Christ in the divine act of hypostatic union. All the divine glory was abundant in both God and man Jesus Christ so that glory manifested as glare erupted from within the divine hypostasis of Christ that being the perfect union between the divine and human resulting in one person of Jesus Christ Son of God. Palamas acknowledges though that the divine light did not come from the human nature of Christ alone but it was a result of perichoresis. In that respect the divine nature did not let all the glory to be manifested through Christ's human body in order not to be overwhelming. The taboric light was therefore a sample of the divine glory which God had shared to us and its meaning is to point to a future event where the glory would not be constraint but rather displayed in all its power.¹⁷

Apophatic characteristics of the divine light

Gregory Palamas sees apophatic theology as a positive experience.¹⁸ The union with God means a delightfulness comparable by grace to the status existence of angels. Barlaam had not such a spiritual approach towards the apophatic theology. According to him, the ephemeral and relativity of the creation leads to the idea of an Absolute Person. Such comparison between the creation and God is not enough to stress unknowable nature of God. Barlaam's approach deals with the created matter whilst Palamas approach implies a more intimate relation with God where we experience Him in transcendent realm by means of His grace. Although Palamas underlines the importance and superiority of that intimate union he did not reject the negative theology for it remains an instrument for understanding God, although an incomplete one.¹⁹

Faith is the bridge that links man and God, it is the core stone of the union. Apophatic theology gives the means necessarily to understand

Calvário, „Theosis and the Metaphysics of Light”, pp. 229-230; D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învâțătura*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁷ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 290.

¹⁸ John Meyendorff underlines the fact the Palamas acknowledges the incomplete realm of the negation theology of which he opposes the concept of seeing the unseen. J. Meyendorff, *O introducere*, pp. 393-395.

¹⁹ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, pp. 327-328.

the receiving of divine light, but this could remain only at this understanding level and not elevate it to the actual lived experience. The union is not determined by this understanding or knowledge because the divine light might be experience even in the absence of such knowledge (which does not incorporate the feeling). Faith overshadows knowledge and it is the true instrument through which the believers live for Christ and accept Him to live within themselves. It is an ontological difference to talk about the divine light and to actually experience it.²⁰

What negation means in this perspective is to acknowledge the deep govern of the light which covers all that is known. In this respect Gregory Palamas uses the negation theology, by accepting that the light and the experience of light goes beyond words in order to transpose it into a definition. The mind can understand and view all that exists in creation for it is the purpose of the mind to know or to offer knowledge. Having said that, the scope of mind's knowledge is limited to creation God being beyond creation the mind can not know God through its cognitive processes because of that very limitation. Only God can unlock that processes of the mind which results in knowing him and the means by which God do this is by offering His grace. Through grace mind becomes a subject that has the power to know the divine Subject. We define it knowledge in lack of other terminology but that knowledge does not interfere with the cognitive processes of intelligible mind for the divine light transcends that perception field. That mind is not able to know God by its own capabilities is an neo-platonic philosophical theory. Thus the spiritual elements augment the mind in order to strengthen it for being able to receive the above-mind and above-human understanding spiritual stimuli.²¹

Experiencing the divine light could not be labeled as „science” because again no word encompasses the entire true meaning of that experience. The light itself is beyond the bounds of any object that supports a definition so is the experience of coming in contact what it; the interaction between man and light is speechless. Again knowledge signifies too little and it's a narrow term to place along with the union between man and light (light as the divine Subject). That is the reason

²⁰ In order to strengthen his arguments, Palamas uses the writings of Saint Dinosyius the Areopagite and Saint Gregory of Nyssa which offers as exemple the case of Moses which had seen the immaterial tabernacle in the darkness of the mountain. Being surrounded by darkness, Moses saw Christ, being filled with glory at the sight of eternal life. Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 333-337.

²¹ For a holistic approach towards these concepts see D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învătătura*, pp. 60-62.

why the Fathers had chosen to describe that experience with the help of negation. That, of course does not mean that if we can not define it the union with the light is senseless since it subsumes all the existing senses being both intelligible and non-intelligible. The former term refers to the possibility that we can actually talk about the existence of the sight and the last one implies that we don't know how this sight works meaning that it is impossible to us to understand rationally its mystery.²²

Having in mind what we have previously said we can understand why Gregory Palamas decided to describe the divine light unknowable given its transcendent character being distinctive of any other natural knowledge. The light may be seen only under the grace of the Spirit which enables us to be worthy of a sight that surpasses any sight or knowledge in creation, the sight beyond the sight, the feeling beyond the feeling and the touch beyond any touch.²³ Palamas conceives this entire argumentation in order to disprove Barlaam's narrow philosophical system which constrained hesycast experience to rational thinking.

Seeing of the divine light

Seeing and perceiving the spiritual light is a genuine experience not just a symbolic gesture. It is a light accessible only to spiritual eyes facilitated by grace for it is grace only that can unlock the mind and sight to receive the light. God makes himself available to us through a light that we can slightly perceive but can not fully comprehend it by logic. For the fact that we can even slightly perceive the light that means that it is not one thing with God's essence which is completely inaccessible and can not be shared.²⁴ It is impossible to us to know and understand God in its essence but what we can know and contemplate are its manifestations that being enough for our deliverance.²⁵

What is important is both our spiritual and physical eyes may be delighted with the sight of divine light if the body was cleansed from sins.²⁶ If we relinquish Bralaam's perspective that the light may be experienced by logic only and accept that the seeing of light requires a

²² Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, pp. 339-341.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 342.

²⁴ Cf. J. Meyendorff, *O introducecere*, pp. 348-349.

²⁵ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 273.

²⁶ Gregory Plamas does not deny the significance of the human body in the act of divine light sight saying that it too is a part of that process, thus he deny the antropological dualism. J. Meyendorff, *O introducecere*, pp. 296-298; P. Calvário, „Theosis and the Metaphysics of Light”, p. 233.

spiritual approach it will be accessible to us. The mind becomes ready to view the divine light only after the acknowledgement of its limits, which is a process concomitant with purification from sins. Only after that God allows spiritual views for the mind to comprehend and experience.²⁷ The superior level of the mind, the spiritual one is thus possible but only in the Spirit of God not by its natural skills.

Saint Gregory Palamas shows that a close relation with God do not involve a high education because not the mind purified by the lack of knowledge permits the experience of light but the purification from sins, continual prayer and a humble heart are the means to the real joy. Relinquishing pride and ignorance we make room for the Spirit to overflow our mind with grace which opens new spiritual sight channels. An early paramount condition to achieve that state of mind is the observance of the commands given by God. Jesus equals the love for him with the observance of the commands as a logical consequence of carrying love for Him (Jn 14:23). The Father and The Son will coinhere in such a man and will make him worthy of the divine light's sight.²⁸

An advanced and exercised prayer bridges the seeing or union with the light, such a prayer creates the context for us to leave behind the earthly concerns and to contemplate by negation the glory of God.²⁹ In other word negation means to accept that God is not only what we define Him in a scholastic manner as *love*, *justice* or *essence* being beyond such definitions. It is not a negation in terms of denial something, it means just that we acknowledge that our mind simply can not comprehend God's entire glory through logic. The Holy Spirit (whom presence is preceded by advanced prayer) is the divine subject that can enable our mind to be able to receive God's mind. Prayer is thus a form in which we can experience high levels of connection with God, a greater form than negation theology. We are not alone in this process because the Spirit comes in our aid in order to enable the mind to connect and view the light. But before the Spirit to come that advanced state of prayer relies only in our will and once we learn how to detach from every earthly thought even from the mind itself our struggle end and the Spirit comes to give us by grace new spiritual powers, prayer being the foundation over which those spiritual powers are built on. In the moment the Spirit starts its work in our mind it is able to receive the

²⁷ Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 274-276.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 368-369.

²⁹ Since the beginning of the treaty we can trace the importance of prayer when it comes to the sight of divine light. Moreover this very treaty is an extension of a previous treaty dedicated to prayer. *Ibidem*, p. 263.

divine light which will grow accordingly with our personal effort of elevation which in turn will enable a continuous work of the Spirit.³⁰ The Spirit's work starts at the end of prayer but lasts forever ever-growing, being in perpetuum beyond physical time. Any earthly process or feeling will fade in that state of union because the sight of the light means union with it.³¹

Our mind has the capacity to overcome itself through God and in God. Saint Gregory Palamas makes an ingenious comparison saying that anyone knows other persons but only when a particular person opens with the heart to another one, only then the persons could say that he truly knows that other person. Same is with God, the mind has to overcome itself, to deny its own logic capabilities of knowledge in order to know God which opens with His light to that pure mind. Palamas named the sight of the divine light in a negative form as beyond sight and beyond understanding because it is much more than intelligible sight. The light is not in conflict with knowledge and sight thou; Palamas uses such a negation approach just to underline its uncreated character that can not be comprehended by natural processes of the mind. There is sight just not a natural one as we understand it that's the reason why Palamas names it beyond sight.

The sight of the light is possible through spiritual eyes in times of pure prayer catalyzed by strong faith. Our mind can not go after the intelligible realm, and that „after” is where true knowledge of God resides.³² The union with God's mind is over and above natural processes of thought and comprehension. It is the deepest knowledge unparalleled by knowledge of any created object. The sight of divine light can not be recall in words which are products of mind's processes. Those who experience such a sight bear the grace of the Holy Spirit.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 275-276.

³¹ D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învâțătura*, p. 58.

³² Sf. Grigorie Palama, „Despre sfânta lumină”, p. 338.