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On the Notions of Essence, Hypostasis, Person, and Energy in Orthodox Thought

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d. Essence and hypostasis

The God of ecclesiastical experience is *One* and *Triadic*. For understanding the truth of the One God, the Church appropriates for its use the philosophical concept of one *Essence* (*Ousia*).

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For the definition of the three-fold state of God, it uses the concept of three *Hypostases* or *Persons*. So for the Church, God is *consubstantial* (one Essence— *homoousios* and *tri-hypostatic* (three Hypostases or Persons).

We have appropriated the concept of essence for our use because this word means the fact of *participating* in *being*. In Greek, the word for "essence" (*ousia*) is derived from the feminine participle of the verb "to be". But in the case of God we cannot speak about participation in being, but about Being itself, the fulness of every possibility for existence and life. Therefore the apophatic formulation "Being beyond all being" which the Fathers often use is closer to the expression of the truth of the God of the Church.

Nevertheless, the distinction between Essence and Hypostases of Essence makes it easier for the Church to "define" and describe the experience of the revelation of God. We may somehow understand more clearly what it is that this distinction means to define if we think that man, formed "in the image" of God, is also one Essence (consubstantial) and a multitude of hypostases or persons (multi-hypostatic). We derive the concept of one essence from the whole set of properties and marks which characterize each man: Each man has reason, thought, will, Judgement, imagination, memory, etc. All of us share these common ways in existence, in being; we have a common essence. But every particular realization (hypostasis) of this Being, that is, each man separately, incarnates all the common marks of our essence in a unique, different and unrepeatably way: He speaks, thinks, decides, imagines in a manner absolutely *other* (different to any other man). Each human existence has absolute *otherness*.

We speak, then, of an essence, which however, whether in the case of God or in the case of man, does not exist apart from the specific person who gives it subsistence. Persons hypostasize essence, they give it an hypostasis, that is, real and specific existence. Essence exists only “in persons”; persons are the *mode of existence* of essence.

Again, this does not mean that essence is simply an abstract concept (the concept of Divinity or of humanity) which is formed only in the mind of man as a summary of common

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properties and marks. We say that essence does not exist except incarnate in concrete persons, but, especially in the case of man, the specific persons (all of us) have a real experience of differentiation of our personal hypostasis from our essence or nature:¹ We often sense that there exist in us two desires, two wills, two needs which seek to be satisfied. The one desire, will or need expresses our *personal* choice and preference, while the other is a *natural* urge (tendency or propensity) which fights against the first and appears as an *impersonal* (instinctive, as we say) demand which leaves no room for free thought, judgement and decision. The Apostle Paul notes this division when he writes to the Romans: “I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (Rom 7.15-23, RSV).

In the following pages of this book, we will speak more analytically about the “rebellion” of human nature against the freedom of the person, the impulse of our nature to exist, to maintain itself and to survive by itself, only as nature, not as personal otherness and freedom. And we will see that this division of nature and person constitutes the failure (“sin”) of man’s existence, with death as its final consequence. For the present here we are interested in the truth of nature or essence, which we will study in the case of man as an existential experience of antithesis in the freedom of the person. In the case of God, though, we have nothing given for the study of his Essence; we believe only that no antithesis of nature and person exists there, since failure and death do not exist there. We dare to say (always relatively, within the finite capacity of human language) that the existential falseness of the divine nature harmonizes perfectly with the freedom of the divine Persons, and therefore there is a common divine will and activity and unbreakable unity of life in the Trinity. Unity both of nature and of freedom, a freedom which unites the nature to the life of love. Love constitutes the *being (einaï)* of Divinity. But we cannot know what the Essence of Divinity is

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exactly which the three Persons hypostasize. It transcends not only the abilities of our language, but even our capacity to comprehend the limits of our experience. We are speaking, then, of the incomprehensible mystery of Divinity, the unfathomable truth of the divine Essence.

¹ The two terms “Essence” and “nature” are usually used with the same conceptual content.

e. The person

We do not know what God is in his Essence, but we do know the mode of his existence. God is a personal existence, three specific personal existences of whose personal difference the Church has direct historical experience.

We must stop here again: What exactly is a personal existence? What does “person” mean? It seems difficult to define and the definition is, perhaps, finally unattainable. Even in the case of man, where bodily individuality makes “personhood”, the personal elements of human existence, concrete and immediately accessible, it hardly seems feasible for us to define objectively what it is which constitutes personhood, which imparts a personal character to existence.

In principle certainly, there is an answer which it is usual to give to these questions: We all understand that what differentiates personal existence from every other form of existence is *self-consciousness* and *otherness*. We call the awareness of our own existence “self-consciousness”, the certainty that I have that I exist, and that it is I who exist, a being with identity, an identity which differentiates me from every other being. And this differentiation is an absolute otherness, a unique, distinct, and unrepeatable character which defines my existence.

Nevertheless, the awareness of one’s existence, the ego, the identity, the consciousness of absolute otherness is not plainly and simply a product of the mind, a result of a function of the brain which we call understanding. Selfconsciousness is something much more than an intellectual certainty; it has “substrata” which are explored by a whole science, depth psychology, and which are called subconscious, unconscious, ego, superego. In countless ways it tries to define this ultimately intangible and indeterminate something which *is*

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man, beyond bodily functions and bio-chemical reactions and irritation of cells or any other objective interpretations.

By means of analyses of dreams, of associations, of automatic behaviour, and by reference to childhood experiences, to the first relations with the family environment, depth psychology tries to trace the way in which the ego is formed and matures, and this way that the ego both is formed and matures is nothing other than relationship, reference. It is the potential which *constitutes* man, the potential to be *opposite* someone or something, to have one’s *face-toward* someone or something, to be a *person*.² It is the potential to say “I”, addressed to “you”, to converse, to share. The person is not an arithmetic unit, an atom from a whole, an entity in itself

² The prefix “*pros*” (“to”, “toward”) together with the noun “*ops, opos*”, which means “look”, “eye”, or “face”, forms the compound word “*prosopon*”, ‘face’, or “person”.

He exists only as a self-conscious otherness, consequently only *in comparison with* every other existence, only in relation to, in connection with.

Therefore only the direct relationship, encounter, reference can make a person known. No objective information is able to exhaust the dissimilarity of the person, to make the person known to us. Whatever detailed descriptions we give, as long as we insist on the quantitative nuances of individual traits and properties (physiological characteristics, temperament, character, etc.), what we determine will, in any case, be the same for many individuals, because it is impossible with objective formulations of our everyday language to mark off the uniqueness and dissimilarity of a person. Therefore we must separately evaluate the importance of the function of the name, which alone can signify this uniqueness, which alone can express and reveal a person beyond all concepts and determinations.

f. The experience of relationship

If by means of all these descriptions and analyses, we have somehow sketched out and described the experience of

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approaching the truth of the person, then we can say that the Church has this experience in her encounter and relationship with the Hypostases of Divinity. We have seen that from the beginning the experience of the patriarchs of Israel confirmed the personal character of Divinity: They meet him “person to person”, they speak with him “face to face”. The God of Israel is the true God, that is, the really existing, living God, since he is the God of *relationship*, of personal immediacy. Whatever is beyond the possibility of a relationship, what is unrelated, is also non-existent, even if human logic confirms its existence. On Mt. Horeb, Moses asks God himself to reveal his personal identity to his people by declaring his Name (Ex 3.13-14). “I am the One who is”, answers God, and Moses announces to the people that Yahweh (the “I am”) sends him and calls the Israelites to worship “He who is”. The divine Name is not a noun which would classify God among beings, nor an adjective which would attribute a characteristic feature. It is a verb, it is the echo on the lips of people of the Word by which God defines himself as existent, as the only pre-eminent existent.

God defines himself as existent from within the limits of a relationship with his people; the revelation of his Name as existent is a covenant relationship with Israel. For the Israelites God is not obliged by his Essence to exist; his existence is not a logical necessity. He is existent because he is faithful to his covenant relationship with his people; his existence is confirmed by faithfulness to a relationship, that is, by the personal immediacy of his revelation and his interventions in the history of Israel.

c. Natural energies

In the previous pages we have spoken about the Triadic God and about the way in which we can speak about his existence. We have distinguished the reality which is shown by the word “essence” or “nature” from the reality which is shown by the word “person” or “hypostasis”. In speaking now about the world, we have used the word “energy”, in order to show a third reality, which is distinguished both from “essence” and from “hypostasis” and which is just as constitutive of what exists as the other two and at the same time their consequence.

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In fact, the Theology of the Church interprets the reality of existence, the appearance and disclosure of *being*, starting from these two fundamental distinctions: It distinguishes essence or nature from the person or hypostasis, as it distinguishes the energies both from the nature and from the hypostasis. In these three basic categories, nature-hypostasis-energies, Theology summarizes the *mode of existence of God*, the world, and man.

But what exactly do we designate with the word *energies*? We designate those potentials of nature or essence to make known the hypostasis and its existence, to make it known and participable. This definition will be more clear if we again use an example from our immediate experience, if we speak about the energies of human nature or our essence.

Every man has understanding, reason, will, desire, imagination; every man works, loves, creates. All these capacities, and still others analogous to them, are common to all people and there ore we say that they belong to the human nature or essence. They are natural capacities or energies which differentiate man from every other being.

But these natural energies, while they are common to every man, are disclosed and actualized by each man in a unique way, distinct and unrepeatable. All men have understanding, will, desire, imagination; but every particular man thinks, wills, desires, imagines in a manner absolutely different. Therefore we say that the natural energies not only differentiate man from every other being, but also are manifested in a way that differentiates every man from all his fellow men. The natural energies are the way in which the otherness of each human hypostasis, that is of every human person, is revealed and disclosed.

There is no other way for us to know the personal otherness of man, than by the manifestation of natural energies. The natural energies permit us to know the otherness of the person by *sharing* in the way or in the *how* of their manifestation. The way or the how the word of Kavafi differs from the word of Sepheris, the love of our father from the affection of our mother, is

something that cannot be designated objectively, except with conditional expressions and comparative images.

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In order for us to know this difference, we must share, have the experience of sharing, in the word or in the love of the other person. We have said in some preceding pages that for us to know a person we must have a relationship with him. Now to complete this concept we can say that the relationship does not mean a simple meeting, a direct view or observation, but a sharing or participation in the energies which reveal the otherness of the person in his facial expression, in his word, in his loving manifestation, etc.

St Maximus the Confessor made a very significant observation on this subject. He realized that there are two kinds of energies: those homogeneous and those heterogeneous to the nature of the one giving effect to the energies, as he characterized them. There are, that is, energies which are manifested in a manner homogeneous (of the same kind, of the same character, of the same quality) with the nature of the one acting. There are also energies which are revealed by means of essences of a kind different from the nature of the one acting. The human voice, for instance, articulate expression, is all energy of reason homogeneous with the nature of man. But [there] can also be a disclosure of the energy of the reason by means of essences "heterogeneous" to the nature of man the ability of other essences to be formed into reason, such as writing, colour, marble, music.

And so we are able to understand how it is possible for us to know a person both directly and indirectly: We know him directly when we meet him, we hear his word, we see his expression, his look, his laugh, when we love him and he loves us. But we also know a person indirectly when we just read what he has written, when we hear the music which he has composed or we see the pictures which he has drawn.

And in both cases the knowledge is incomparably fuller than any "objective" informing of us about a person. Perhaps we can bring together all the information that there is about the life, say, of Van Gogh, we can read all his biographies which have been written. But we know the person of Van Gogh, what is unique, distinct and unrepeatable in his existence, only when we see his paintings. There we meet a reason (*logos*) which is his only and we separate him from every other

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painter. When we have seen enough pictures by Van Gogh and then encounter one more, then we say right away: This is Van Gogh. We distinguish immediately the otherness of his personal reason, the uniqueness of his creative expression.

Nevertheless, even this acquaintance with the person of Van Gogh by means of the study of his work, even though it is incomparably fuller than the biographical information about his person,

does not cease to be an indirect knowledge. It would be direct knowledge if we met Van Gogh himself, spoke with him and lived with him, loved him and were loved by him. But here, we wish to insist on the possibility which exists to know a person by the revelation of his reason (his existential otherness) by means of essences heterogeneous to the essence of his own person. Van Gogh is a man according to his essence, while one of his pictures is canvas and colours according to its essence. But these colours on top of canvas become a *word* which reveals the “secret” of the person, the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Van Gogh’s existence. The creative *energy* of Van Gogh, his artistic creation, makes possible our own sharing and participation in the knowledge of his person.

A further observation from the same example: All of us who recognize the uniqueness of the word of Van Gogh facing one of his pictures, share, each of us, in this word in a personal way, that is unique, distinct and unrepeatable. Nor does the personal sharing of each of us “cut” the word which reveals the otherness of Van Gogh into as many parts as there are people sharing in this word by means of the picture. Personally uttered, the word remains simple and undivided while, at the same time, “it is shared with all in a singular way.” The painted picture (like the poem, the statue, the music, the human voice) represents the energy of a man’s reason (*logos*), that is, the possibility for us to share in the knowledge of the personal otherness of the man— for all of us to share who see the same picture in the same otherness of the one person.