

Jean-Claude Larchet

La théologie des énergies divines

Des origines à saint Jean Damascène. (Cogitatio Fidei 272). Paris : Cerf, 2010. 479p.

Reviewed by Job Getcha

The aim of this book of the well know French Orthodox patrologist is to answer the following question: Do the Church Fathers, before Gregory Palamas, develop a theology of divine energies? This question is very actual since, as the author claims himself, the question of the distinction between essence and divine energies appears to be most crucial for the relations between East and West (p. 7). Indeed, the author is right to emphasise that it surpasses the purely Byzantine context of an opposition towards Byzantine humanism, and that it appears to be more largely opposed to Augustinianism and Thomism. This then explains the hostility that some Roman Catholic patrologists have towards the theology of Gregory Palamas. This hostility is based on the repetition of the same arguments that were made towards Palamas' thought, such as if the divine energies would threaten the oneness and simplicity in God, or such as the Augustinian presupposition or the Thomist consideration of the Divine grace as created. This is why, according to the author, nowadays, the only

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reference to Divine energies still provokes negative reactions among a large number of Roman Catholic theologians, and leads them to qualify the interpretation of this notion as “palamite” even when it is found in Church Fathers before Palamas (p. 8).

Following D. Bradshaw («The Divine Energies in the New Testament» *SVTQ* 50 (2006), p. 190), the author notes as well that the Greek term “energeia” is very often badly translated in modern languages and rendered by inadequate words. Such poor or inadequate translation either make the notion unnoticed, attenuate its significance or modify its meaning.

Therefore, the author, following D. Bradshaw (*Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics of the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge, 2004), considers that a real gap has appeared since the 5th c. between the Christian East and the Christian West on the notion of Divine energy (p. 13 – one ought to correct here one of the two “Western theology” phrases by replacing it with “Eastern theology”).

Thus, the study of the theology of Divine energies before Palamas is very significant for contemporary theology, since it touches on many related questions: the knowledge of God, the theology of grace, the Latin doctrine of *Filioque*, the concept of deification. The author is conscious that there is no unique theology of Divine energies, and therefore, explains the title of his book by saying that his only intention is to reflect on the energies in relation to God by locating each Church Father in his own context (p. 24).

In order to answer the main question of his book, the author maintains a certain distance from Gregory Palamas and studies a wide corpus of philosophical, scriptural and patristic texts ending with the doctrinal synthesis of John Damascene.

The author starts his study by analysing the philosophical sources (p. 25-64): Plato, where the notion of energy does not appear but which the author links with the notion of ideas; Aristotle, where the term “energeia” appears for the first time in Greek literature, some 670 times with the general meaning of action or act; stoicism, where the concept of “energeia” cannot be found, but where it will be associated – correctly or not – with the concept of “logoi”; middle Platonism, which does not give any place to the notion of “energeia”, but where the hierarchy of divinities could be considered as the philosophical origin of the patristic distinction between essence and energies; and finally, Neoplatonism, where one can find such expressions as “energy of essence” and “energy from essence” in Plotinus, who has later influenced Porphyry and Iamblichus, the later having made a distinction between essence (*ousia*), power (*dynamis*) and energy (*energeia*).

The author, still following D. Bradshaw, then considers Philo of Alexandria to whom he dedicates a whole chapter (p. 65-81) and where one can find the term “energeia” several times with the general meaning of activity of operation. The author underlines that Philo brings forth the concept, which later will be developed by the Church Father starting from the Cappadocians, that God is unknowable in his essence but knowable in his energies (p. 68). Nevertheless, he notes that the patristic theology of Divine energies will be developed on a basis other than Philo’s thought (p. 81).

The author then comes to his analysis of the Holy Scriptures to which he dedicates the third chapter of his book (p. 83-93). Having said from the beginning that there are very few occurrences of the term “energeia” in the Septuagint, and only in the 2nd and 3rd book of the Maccabees and in the book of Wisdom, he notes its meaning as an operation of God revealing His power, or simply an activity of God. With regards to the New Testament, the author says that this term is mostly used in the epistles of Paul, where it is used in the form of the verb “energein”, meaning acting, doing or accomplishing, and as well in the form of the substantive “energeia”. The author notes that it is impossible to summarise a theology of Divine energies from these passages, but that they will nevertheless serve as a basis for the later theological reflections of the Church Fathers (p. 93).

Then the author begins his patristic dossier with the Christian literature of the 2nd and 3rd c. (p. 95-113). He cites a passage from the Pastor of Hermas, where the term “energeia” is applied to the activity of angels and their effect on the human soul (p. 95). The author also mentions other quotations ascribed to Justin the Martyr by Maximus the Confessor within the monoenergist and monothelist controversy, which are now considered as apocryphal, and says that Justin, as well as Athenagoras, applies mostly the term “energeia” to the activity of demons. He stresses that Athenagoras is perhaps the first Father to introduce a distinction between the essence (*ousia*) and the energy (*energeia*) of God (p. 98). The author quotes passages from Irenaeus where it is said that God is both knowable and unknowable, and where, according to the author, the notion of energy is being suggested by terms which are close to it, in the context of Divine economy (p. 104). The author notes as well the distinction made by Clement of Alexandria between what God is in himself and the power (*dynamis*) of God (p. 105), and notices that his notion of power is really close to the notion of energy used by subsequent Church Fathers (p. 107) and which could also be found a few times in Clement himself with the meaning of activity, operation or action. Finally, the author notes in this chapter that although the notion of energy is rarely used by Origen – and

only in the meaning of activity or action – it allows him to explain that the Logos permits those who are worthy to know God. On the other hand, Origen will inherit from the stoics the notion of “logoi”, which, although unrelated in his writings to the notion of Divine energies, will be related to this notion by Maximus the Confessor (p. 113).

The chapter 5 is dedicated to Athanasius of Alexandria (p.115-121). Following G. Florovsky, the author reminds us of the distinction which exists in Athanasius between the nature of God and his powers. This distinction is not applied as it is in Philo, Clement of Alexandria and Origen to the relation of God and his Logos, but rather to the inner being of God (theology) and its creative and providential manifestation (economy) (p. 116). The author underlines that one step forward is being made by Athanasius in the elaboration of the theology of the Divine energies. Concerning the question of the *Filioque*, he reminds the reader that it is precisely Athanasius who had subsequently inspired Gregory of Cyprus, who makes a distinction between the Divine energy received as the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the person of the Holy Spirit, although he considers that the Holy Spirit is always totally present in its grace, and that, therefore, the affirmation that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son should not be applied to the hypostatic procession, but to the sending of the grace of the Holy Spirit which is the at the same time the grace of the Father and of the Son (p. 120).

In the 6th chapter, the author speaks of Didymus the Blind (p. 123-128) who develops the notion of energy always in relation with essence. In the context of Divine economy, Didymus assimilates grace to Divine energy and Divine energy to grace, reminding us that grace is being communicated by the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and that although grace is being assimilated to the Holy Spirit, it remains distinct from the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit and from the Divine essence (p. 126).

In chapter 7 (p. 129-143), the author examines the writings of Pseudo-Macarius, where we find the expression “energy of the Holy Spirit” several times, although it always appears in the context of spiritual life and not of theological discourse. Here, the author speaks also of Diadochos of Photiki who uses it as well abundantly to designate the activity or operation of the Holy Spirit in the soul.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to the controversy between Eunomius and Basil the Great (p. 145-162). On this occasion, the author underlines that unfortunately, in the West, in the studies dedicated to the Eunomian controversy, the question of the Divine energies does not only appear as secondary, but is also merely mentioned and even sometimes occulted (p. 145). The importance of this notion in the writings of Basil the Great

has been revealed by Orthodox theologians such as B. Krivocheine or G. Marzelos, whose footsteps the author is following in this book. Indeed, Basil the Great was the first Church Father to make a clear distinction, in the context of the Arian controversy, between Divine essence and Divine energies. Besides that, Basil assimilates Divine energy to grace and states clearly that it is uncreated.

In chapter 9 (p. 163-181), the author examines the concept of “energeia” in Gregory the Theologian (which he calls with his Western designation as Gregory of Nazianzus) starting from his concept of the knowledge of God. The author recalls the different usages of the term “energeia” where it has the common meaning of activity, and then of Divine power, and finally as grace of the Holy Spirit. The author notes that the Theologian has a less developed and less rigorous usage of this notion than the other Cappadocians, and underlines that sometimes his expressions are ambiguous and require an exegesis in order to be correctly understood (p. 180-181).

Then the author analyses in chapter 10 (p. 183-232) the concept of Divine energies in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, where the term “energeia” appears almost 700 times and where it has generally the meaning of activity, and sometimes, of operation. The author, in part liable here on a study of B. Krivocheine, reminds the reader that Gregory of Nyssa relates the energy (or energies) with the power and the essence of God, which, according to him, pre-exist to the energies. The author criticises here the thesis of B. Pottier who considered on the one hand the power as interior to the essence, and on the other, the energy as exterior, reminding the reader that if the energies could only be known through the created beings, this does not mean that they are exclusively related to created beings (p. 192). He underlines that Gregory of Nyssa develops – even more than Basil the Great – the theological reflection on the notion of Divine energy, giving to it an extent and a depth which did not exist before.

In chapter 11 (p. 233-246), the author examines the works of John Chrysostom where the notion of “energeia” is present in almost 360 occurrences, with the classical meaning of activity or operation, and where this expression designates very often the Divine grace. But the author notes that Chrysostom does not elaborate a very developed theology of this notion (p. 235), reminding the reader that, according to this Church Father, if the Divine essence is totally unknowable, the Divine energies could only be partially knowable (p. 240).

Another important chapter of this book is dedicated to the place and the importance of the notion of “energeia” in the works of Cyril of Alexandria (p. 247-288), a subject which has not been specifically studied until now. The author notes that Cyril uses the term “energeia” in a different context

than the one of the Cappadocian Fathers: he often utilises it, according to the classical Aristotelian distinction, to designate what is “in action” (*kat’ energian*) by opposition to what is “in power” (*kata dynamin*) (p. 248). Sometimes, “energeia” is being opposed to “pathos” to designate what is active in opposition to what is passive (p. 250). Applied to God, the term points out to God’s activity in general, or to His grace (p. 252). According to Cyril, the energy is always related to the essence or to the nature (two terms which are synonymous in Cyril’s works), which does not prevent him to distinguish it clearly. Furthermore, Cyril underlines that the energy, which he associates very often with the Divine grace and which he considers as uncreated, is common to and the same in the three Divine hypostasis, and affirms that the multitude of Divine energies does not affect the simplicity of God.

The next chapter (p. 289-329), where the author is partially indebted to V. Lossky, is dedicated to the notion of Divine energy in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite where it appears almost 75 times and where it is often related to the notion of essence (*ousia*) and power (*dynamis*). Having reviewed the different contexts where Dionysius uses the term, the author underlines that the notion of “energeia” in the *Corps Areopagiticum*, often used in the meaning of activity or operation and associated with the notions of radiation of God, Divine grace or Creator, is not used in the same way as it is in his predecessors’ works to designate God’s qualities or the attributes. The author notes that Dionysius prefers to speak of unions (*enôseis*) and distinctions (*diakriseis*), or of God knowable and unknowable, or of the Divine names, or of God in Himself or outside of Himself, – which are different ways of referring to a theology of Divine energies.

Chapter 14, the longest of the book (p. 331-421) explores the theology of Divine energies in Maximus the Confessor where it is implicated in all theological fields (triadology, Christology, cosmology, anthropology, spiritual life...). As one of the greatest contemporary specialists of this Church Father, the author claims that Maximus has given an unprecedented depth and accuracy to the theological reflection on the notion of energy (p. 331). He mentions a certain number of studies on this topic, among which the doctoral dissertation of Metropolitan Vasilios Karayiannis (*Maxime le Confesseur. Essence et énergies de Dieu*. Paris : Beauchesne, 1993). The author begins to analyse the triad: essence – power – energy, and notes that although the energy is being related directly to the power, it depends fundamentally on the essence, recalling that, according to Maximus, there is no energy without essence, and no essence without energy. The author criticizes some interpretations of Maximus concerning the distinction between essence and energy made by

E. von Ivanka who considered that Maximus was denying this distinction (p. 363-364), and by J.-M. Garrigues who claimed that the Confessor had anticipated the Thomist conception of the coincidence of essence and energy (p. 365-367). The author also examines the notions of “energeia” and “logoi”, which sometimes are being confused although they ought to be, according to him, clearly distinguished (p. 392-395). He also covers Maximus’ perception of energies as Divine glory, Light and Grace, and underlines the uncreated character of the Divine energies in his writings. The author concludes this chapter by speaking of the energies in relation with the Divine persons, and considers that it is abusive to qualify, as does J. Meyendorff in his dissertation on Gregory Palamas, the theology of Maximus on the Divine energies as “personalist”. By saying this, the author points to the danger of projecting modern categories onto patristic thought (p. 415-416).

The 15th and last chapter of this book (p. 423-450) is dedicated to the theology of John the Damascene who resumes in a more restrained and systematic way the developments of Maximus. One can find more than 400 occurrences of the term “energeia” in the works of Damascene who dedicates even entire chapters to this notion. The author examines in his works the philosophical interpretation of the term, its application to cosmology and anthropology, and finally, the theological application where the notion of “energeia” finds itself attached to the notions of essence and power. The author reminds the reader that, according to the Damascene, energy does not relate to the hypostasis, but to the nature, and thus, as he points out in triadology, there is only one energy common to the three Divine persons since there is a unique Divine nature; however, in Christology, there are two energies in Christ just as there are two natures. For John the Damascene, Divine energy corresponds to Divine grace and has an uncreated character. The author underlines that for John of Damascus, God is invisible by nature but visible in His energies. This appears, among others, in his treatises for the defence of holy icons, which represent perhaps the most original works of this Church Father.

The book ends with a large bibliography of patristic sources (p. 461-470). Nevertheless, one could have wished to find as well a complete bibliography of contemporary studies, which appear in the footnotes. An index would have been also welcomed in such a book that imposes itself as a reference. However, the summary of the main theses in the second part of the conclusion (p. 455-460) with references to Church Fathers and sections of this book could be very useful and serve as a sort of thematic index.

In conclusion, we welcome the publication of this important book, as we find it very useful and indeed indispensable for any person interested in the sources of Byzantine theology. In addition to showing us the elaboration of major Byzantine theological themes, the book is particularly valuable for its excellent patristic dossier, where abundant patristic quotes enable the reader to make his own opinion. The book shows also the difficulty of patristic hermeneutics, which perhaps have not been taken sufficiently into account in the fields of Christian dogmatic theology and in the ecumenical dialogue. Our most sincere wish is that it will contribute, if not dispel some misconceptions, some of which have existed for centuries, and at the very least, inspire a productive theological discussion.