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0521828651 - Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom

David Bradshaw

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ARISTOTLE EAST AND WEST

Historians of philosophy have tended to limit the study of Christian philosophy during the Middle Ages to the medieval West. This book presents the thought of the Greek Fathers as a significant and substantial alternative. Focusing on the central issue of the nature of God and the relationship between God's being and activity, David Bradshaw traces the history of *energeia* and related concepts from their starting-point in Aristotle, through the pagan Neoplatonists, to thinkers such as Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas (in the West) and Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas (in the East). The result is a powerful comparative history of philosophical thought in the two halves of Christendom, providing a philosophical backdrop to the schism between the eastern and western churches. It will be of wide interest to readers in philosophy, theology, and medieval history.

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οὐ μόνον μαθῶν ἀλλὰ καὶ παθῶν τὰ θεῖα

St. Dionysius the Areopagite

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Preface

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? That is a question that no student of western culture can avoid. Tertullian, who first posed it, did so in the course of accusing philosophy of engendering heresy. The implication behind his question was that Athens and Jerusalem are two different worlds, and therefore categories deriving from Greek thought should have no place within the Christian faith. Yet even Tertullian found it impossible in practice to maintain such a strict division. The Church as a whole tended instead to follow the lead of the Greek apologists, who had drawn freely on Greek philosophy in interpreting the Christian message. Ultimately the many forms of Christian thought that vied for pre-eminence throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and into the early modern era, almost invariably owed much to both of Tertullian's opposing worlds. The result is that Athens and Jerusalem have been deeply and inextricably intertwined in the formation of western culture.

This fusion gives to Tertullian's question a different and more alarming meaning. Viewed in light of the intervening history, the question is not simply whether Christian theology should make use of Greek philosophy; it is whether the two great sources of our civilization are compatible. To hold that they are not is necessarily to put into question, not only at least one of them (and perhaps both), but also the civilization that grew out of their union. Whatever one's own views on this question, it is all too clear that our culture as a whole has given it a negative answer. No conflict is more familiar, or recurs in more varied forms, than that between the apostles of reason and enlightenment and those of moral authority and revealed truth. In the ongoing culture wars, and the alleged conflict of science and religion, it is as if Athens and Jerusalem were at war before our eyes. The very existence of these conflicts reflects a pervasive sense that reason and revelation are at odds. Some of us respond to this situation gladly, welcoming the chance to choose decisively one or the other. Others face it with more ambivalence,

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and even with a sense that something precious has been lost. Whether one chooses gladly or reluctantly, however, the inescapable fact is that our culture demands that we choose.

It was not always so. The history of western philosophy is, among other things, the long story of the attempt to bring Athens and Jerusalem into harmony. If today our culture operates under the working assumption that they are not in harmony, then the reason must lie ultimately in the shipwreck of those endeavors. That is where the historian of philosophy, and especially of philosophy in its relation to Christian thought, faces an important and even an urgent task. When and how did this shipwreck occur? Was it inevitable? Was there perhaps a wrong turn taken along the way – one that, had it been taken differently, might have led to a different result? And, if so, is that possibility still open to us? Or has history now effectively foreclosed all reconsideration, so that the divorce of Athens and Jerusalem is a fact to which we can respond in different ways, but which cannot itself be placed into question?

Such is the line of thought that has prompted this study. I propose to consider these questions particularly in light of the split between the two halves of Christendom, the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West. It is surely important that, viewed from a historical standpoint, the shipwreck of faith and reason was strictly a western phenomenon. In the Christian East there occurred no such result. The importance of this fact has been obscured because, up until recently, the Christians of the East were widely regarded in the West as heretics. Only in recent years has it become clear how grossly misplaced was this longstanding prejudice. The more that eastern Christianity begins to take on legitimacy, however, the more the reaction against western Christianity that has shaped so much of our cultural and intellectual history begins to seem like merely a local squabble. Eastern Christendom had from the beginning a fundamentally different way of understanding the whole range of issues pertaining to the relationship of faith and reason. It may be that whatever shipwreck occurred in the West leaves this eastern tradition untouched. At a minimum, if we are to understand the long story of western philosophy properly, then we must take account of the eastern alternative.

This work is the beginning of an attempt to do so. Its focus is on the formation of the two traditions, eastern and western, in parallel to one another. I have carried the story only to the point where each had achieved a relatively definitive form – that is, to Thomas Aquinas in the West and Gregory Palamas in the East. In the case of neither tradition do I attempt

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a full history even of its philosophical formation, much less of all the other factors that contributed to its distinctive character. My focus is strictly on the fundamental metaphysical themes that helped determine their differences and that are most relevant for assessing their continuing viability. I have attempted to treat the historical material impartially with the aim of arriving at a sympathetic understanding of both traditions within their own context. My conclusions about the meaning of this history, and about the viability of the two traditions, will be found in the Epilogue.

Even to tell such a limited comparative history requires a connecting thread that can be traced up to the point of divergence and down each of the parallel branches. The thread that I have chosen is *energeia*. This is a Greek term that is variously translated as “activity,” “actuality,” “operation,” or “energy,” depending on the author and the context. Its suitability for our purpose arises from a number of converging reasons. In the East it became a key term of Christian theology beginning with the Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century and continuing through the work of Palamas in the fourteenth. The distinction of *ousia* and *energeia*, essence and energy, has long been recognized as the most important philosophical tenet distinguishing eastern Christian thought from its western counterpart. (See particularly the works of Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff cited in the Bibliography.) Yet virtually everything else about this distinction is subject to dispute, including its meaning, its history, and its legitimacy. The only way to resolve these disputes is to give a comprehensive history of the distinction from its Biblical and philosophical roots up through Palamas. That history, in turn, can best be approached through the history of *energeia*.

In the West the term most nearly comparable to *energeia* in its importance for our topic is *esse*, the Latin infinitive “to be.” It is well known that Augustine identified God with being itself, *ipsum esse*, and that Aquinas made this identification the keystone of a carefully reasoned natural theology. What is less well known is that the term *esse* – particularly in the meaning given it by Aquinas, that of the “act of being” – has a history connecting it to *energeia*. The earliest Latin authors to use *esse* in this sense were Boethius and Marius Victorinus. They in turn were simply translating into Latin the philosophical idiom of Greek Neoplatonists such as Porphyry. In particular, *esse* as the act of being is the direct equivalent of the Greek *energein katharon*, the “pure act” which Porphyry or someone in his circle (the author of the Anonymous Commentary on the *Parmenides*) identified with the One. This means that *esse* in its philosophical usage can be understood as deriving from *energeia*. Of course one must bear in mind

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that *esse* did not originate in this way, but only acquired certain additional resonances, and that not all of these resonances remained operative in its later usage. Nonetheless, as a rough preliminary framework one can think of a common stem, *energeia* as it appears within Neoplatonism, developing into two branches, “energies” in the East and *esse* in the West.

That is only a first approximation. Part of what it leaves out is that *energeia* also had a non-philosophical usage that was at least as important for the development of eastern thought as was the influence of Neoplatonism. This non-philosophical usage can be found in historical and scientific writings, the Greek magical papyri, the Hermetica, and above all in the New Testament and early Church Fathers. To understand the essence–energies distinction requires seeing it in light of that prior history. Another reason for beginning earlier than Neoplatonism is that Neoplatonism itself is virtually impossible to understand without some appreciation of its origins. Theses such as that the One is beyond intellect, or that intellect is identical with its objects, or that the effect pre-exists in the cause, are likely to strike most modern readers as hopelessly obscure until they are understood in relation to the arguments that justify them. For the most part these arguments were either formulated first by Plato and Aristotle, or make use of concepts and terminology deriving from them. Fortunately, since our topic is *energeia* it is sufficient to begin with Aristotle, who coined this term.

More broadly, there is a sense in which to focus exclusively on the Christian tradition, viewing earlier developments solely as a preamble to it, would be to distort history. Both pagan and Christian authors were dealing with the same fundamental issues, often drawing on a shared stock of conceptual tools and vocabulary. No one can compare the Anonymous Commentary and Victorinus, or Iamblichus and the Cappadocians, or Proclus and Dionysius – or, for that matter, Aristotle and Aquinas – without recognizing that what they have in common is at least as important as that which separates them. It is only by seeing both the eastern and western traditions as developments out of a shared heritage in classical metaphysics that they can be properly understood. Doing so also has the benefit of shifting the focus of comparison from questions of dogma and ecclesiology to questions of fundamental metaphysics. If this book accomplishes nothing else, I hope it will show that this is the right focus to take, and that by missing it we have misconstrued the entire question of the relationship between the two traditions.

All of this will help to explain the structure of the book. It begins by tracing the common stem of both traditions, from Aristotle through Plotinus

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(Chapters 1–4); then looks at preliminary developments in the West (Chapter 5) and the East (Chapter 6); then traces the growth of the eastern tradition (Chapters 7–8); and finally completes both traditions by a systematic comparison of Augustine, Aquinas, and Palamas (Chapter 9). The Epilogue picks up where this Preface leaves off, asking what light the comparison of the two traditions can shed on our current situation.

A few matters of housekeeping will be helpful to bear in mind. Readers not familiar with patristic texts should be alerted that they often have two numbering systems that run in parallel. Thus, whereas *Enneads* 1.6.9 means section 9 of tract 6 of *Enneads* I, *De Trinitate* x.8.11 means section 11 or chapter 8 of *De Trinitate*, depending on which system is in use. (Most editions give both.) In regard to translations, I have used existing translations where possible but have freely altered them to maintain terminological and stylistic consistency. This is particularly true of the older translations of patristic works. One point on which I have abandoned all hope of consistency is in the choice of Latin or English titles; I have used both indiscriminately, as determined by common usage. I have generally cited editions and translations in abbreviated form in the notes, reserving full information for the Bibliography.

Chapters 1 through 5 were originally written as a dissertation in the ancient philosophy program at the University of Texas at Austin. I would like to thank the members of my committee (R. J. Hankinson, Alexander Mourelatos, Stephen White, Robert Kane, and Cory Juhl) for their guidance in that project. I also wish to thank John Bussanich, John Finamore, Harold Weatherby, Ward Allen, and John Jones for comments on various portions of the later chapters. Chapter 2 was originally published in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, part of Chapter 5 in the *Review of Metaphysics*, and parts of Chapters 6 and 7 in the *Journal of Neoplatonic Studies*. I thank the editors of these journals for permission to reprint the relevant portions.

Last, I should like to acknowledge a debt of a different sort. The greatest difficulty in understanding the eastern tradition has always been that it is so deeply embedded in a lived practice. Even to speak of the “philosophical aspects” of the tradition is to risk serious distortion. In the East there were never the same divisions between philosophy and theology, or theology and mysticism, as in the West, partly because these divisions presuppose a concept of natural reason that is itself a product of the western tradition. For the historian of philosophy, this means that in studying the East one encounters a great deal that is not normally part of one’s professional territory:

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detailed discussions of Trinitarian theology, of prayer, of ascetic practice, of charity toward the poor, and of Scriptural exegesis, often expressed in a baroquely complex vocabulary. One's task is to disentangle the recognizably philosophical elements from their context without distorting them or evacuating them of their meaning. I do not know whether I have succeeded, but I am certain that I would not have begun, and would not have had an inkling of how to proceed, without those who have taught me something of what this tradition means as a lived practice. First among them is my wife. To say that this book is dedicated to her hardly seems enough; in my own mind, her name is written on every page.