

## The Temptation Toward Dualisms and Monisms in Orthodox Theology: Ontological and Political Implications

Aristotle Papanikolaou

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This essay will first discuss how despite their best intentions, contemporary Orthodox theologians were susceptible to ontological dualisms and monisms. This temptation to ontological dualisms and monisms is due, in large part, in failing to see how *theologia* – the speculative theology of the inner life of God as Trinity – developed as a response to ontological dualisms and monisms. I will then discuss the recent manifestation of political dualism in the post-communist situation in the countries where Orthodoxy is a majority with attention on Russia. I will conclude with the suggestion that there is a possible link between ontological and political dualisms, and with the claim that a Trinitarian theology that attempts to overcome ontological dualisms can in no way support political dualisms.

### *Dualisms, Monisms, and the Trinity*

Let me begin with the thesis that there are no helpful dualisms or monisms in theology: in fact, the Christian affirmation of the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity is anti-dualist at its heart. The early Christological debates, which come to a climax in the fourth century with Athanasius against the so-called Arians or non-Nicenes, were, in part, a debate about dualisms and monisms. What Athanasius saw more clearly than anyone prior to him was that if one is to think God as love revealed in the person of Jesus, and if to think God as love means imagining a communion across an ontological abyss – a

divine-human communion – one must affirm Jesus of Nazareth as embodying the full divinity. In doing this, Athanasius was contending against a dualism that would reify an unbridgeable gap between the uncreated and the created with no hope for communion.<sup>1</sup> He was contending against a monotheism that was in essence a dualism in order, to use Karl Rahner's language, to radicalize monotheism<sup>2</sup> so as to imagine God's being as free to be that which is not God, to become history,<sup>3</sup> as John Zizioulas states it, without absorbing that which is not God. Insofar as Athanasius's insight laid the ground for the Christian affirmation of the Trinity, my contention is that the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian response against dualistic and monistic conceptions of the God-world relation.

This fight against a dualistic or monistic understanding of the God-world relation brings to mind Vladimir Lossky's emphasis on theology as antinomy. Although Lossky himself presents antinomy as emerging from the Dionysian apophatic tradition, he, in fact, borrows the concept from Bulgakov and apophaticizes it against Bulgakov.<sup>4</sup> For Lossky, antinomy is the best theological approach toward avoiding dualism and monism. In an antinomic approach to theology; seemingly contradictory statements must be affirmed as true. The goal of

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<sup>1</sup> I more fully develop this position in "Trinity, Violence and Virtue," in *God: Theological Accounts and Ethical Possibilities*, eds. Myriam Renaud and Joshua Daniel (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> "Our basic thesis, put forward here, is meant to show that the doctrine of the Trinity can and must be understood not as a supplement or an attenuation of Christian monotheism, but as its radicalization." Karl Rahner, "Oneness and Threeness of God in Discussion with Islam," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 109.

<sup>3</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 130.

<sup>4</sup> For Lossky on antinomy, "Theology of Light in Gregory Palamas," in *Image and Likeness of God*, eds. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 45–70. See also Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism and Divine-Human Communion* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 27–30. For more on Lossky's indebtedness to Bulgakov, see my "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, eds. Chad Meister and James Beilby (New York: Routledge, 2013), 538–548.

theology is to find the concepts that best express the antinomy that Christ is two natures in one person, or that God is one and three, because theology's task is to express a truth in doctrinal form in the hope that such an expression can lead one ascetically to a lived experience of the dogma. As Lossky states, "the goal of this antinomic theology is not to forge a system of concepts, but to serve as a support for the human spirit in contemplation of divine mysteries."<sup>5</sup> It is only in this lived experience of the dogma, in a mystical experience, that dualisms and monisms are in the end overcome. In the realm of language, any move beyond antinomy either collapses into dualism or monism. There is perhaps a very important insight in Lossky's theology here: language itself inevitably leads to dualisms and monisms. The overcoming of dualisms and monisms for Lossky is only in the lived experience of the living God, made possible in and through ascetical and liturgical practices. In light of this, theological language must be, for Lossky, strictly antinomical.

And yet, Lossky himself could not escape monistic tendencies. Lossky replaced Thomistic *esse* with the Dionysian understanding of God as non-being or *hyper-essence*. And because of this, he (over)emphasized, in my opinion, the essence-energies distinction, leading to a conception of the God-world relation that is itself monistic, notwithstanding his affirmation that the energies themselves are God.<sup>6</sup> In relegating the doctrine of the Trinity simply to a "fact" of the incarnation (another expression he borrowed from Bulgakov), Lossky himself overlooked Athanasius's great insight that dualistic and monistic understandings of the God-world relation are overcome only if we affirm that God has, indeed, become history in the singular, unique life of Jesus of Nazareth; and such an affirmation requires thinking the God of love in terms of distinctions that are permanent and factual. In other words, the Christian answer to a non-dualistic, non-competitive understanding of the God-world relation is not the essence-energies distinction that is grounded in a Dionysian understanding of God as non-

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<sup>5</sup> Lossky, "Theology of Light in Gregory Palamas," 52.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Lossky's monistic tendencies, see my *Being with God*, 123–25.