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## A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology of Vladimir Lossky

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Vladimir Lossky has proven to be an influential theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shaping modern Orthodox theology and challenging Western thought. Key to his thought is how he interrelates the Trinity with apophaticism and the distinction he makes between the essences and energies of God. In doing so he critiques a Western view of the Trinity as found in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Thus, given that he defines theology as complementary to mysticism, and since participation in the energies of the Trinity in deification is the goal of his theology, I shall engage in a critical account of whether his modern Orthodox Trinitarian theology enables him to express the reality of human participation in God or not. I note, as Rowan Williams does in an unpublished thesis, that when discussing the Trinity in Orthodox thought this appears to be ‘a doctrine which is the most radically inaccessible of all to the speculations of the discursive reason, the most totally given of dogmas’.<sup>1</sup> Thus I shall be looking closely at how Lossky’s ‘understanding of theology as “apophatic” . . . is the regulating rule in his trinitarian theology and the understanding of trinitarian categories, such as nature and person’, and how ‘it is also the lens through which he views the *filioque*’.<sup>2</sup>

### The Trinitarian thought of Lossky and Aquinas

Lossky’s Trinitarian thought is best expounded in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. He posits relations in God as simply those of origin, based on Cappadocian theology, rather than Aquinas’ notion of relations of opposition which are developed from their origin. This is illustrated by Gregory Nazianzen who states ‘it is the name of the relation in which the Father stands to the Son, and the

<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *The theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: an exposition and critique*, (University of Oxford. Faculty of Theology. Thesis (D.Phil.)—University of Oxford, 1975), p.85.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God, Trinity, apophaticism, and divine-human communion*, (Notre Dame: UNDPress, 2006), p.50.

## 2 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

Son to the Father. For as with us these names make known a genuine and intimate relation, so in the case before us too they denote an identity of nature between him that is begotten and him that begets'.<sup>3</sup> Lossky develops this way of thinking in contrast to the thought of Thomas Aquinas as posited in his *Summa Theologicae*.

The key part of Aquinas that Lossky disagrees with is his use of the relations of opposition in regard to the relation of origins, used in affirming the *filioque*. In Aquinas, relations in God are based on movement within the divine nature, where the unity is affirmed as the principle of the Trinity, rather than the diversity of the *hypostases*. The four relations of opposition are that of fatherhood, sonship, spiration and procession. For 'all that exists in God is one with the divine nature. So then it is not by considering this unity we can draw the distinction between what is characteristic of this or that procession; rather in order to conceive the specific character of this or that procession we must consider the relatedness of one procession to another'.<sup>4</sup> Thus Aquinas writes that 'although strictly speaking, relations do not originate or proceed from one another, nevertheless we take them as opposed because of the procession of one thing from another'.<sup>5</sup> Thus for Aquinas, the relations of opposition guarantee the unity of the Trinity against seeing the persons as separate: distinction in God arises only through the relation of origin. However, a relation in God is not as an accidental entity in a subject, but is the divine nature itself; therefore it is something subsisting just as the divine nature does, hence 'divine person signifies relation as something subsisting',<sup>6</sup> that is, relation is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature, and what is subsisting in the divine nature can be nothing other than the divine nature itself, namely divine substance (ST 1a 29 4). This depends on the unity of the divine substance, which Lossky critiques as representative of unity overriding diversity in the trinitarian relations.

LaCugna notes that 'Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of God is frequently held out as the paradigm instance of the separation of *theologia* from *oikonomia*',<sup>7</sup> although I am going to suggest later that at first glance his account does not seem so different from the distinction between essence and energies. In fact, Lacugna affirms the idea that the relations in God are based on movement within the divine nature, as

<sup>3</sup> [29:16] *The Theological Orations*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Hardy, (London: SCM Press, 1954), p.171.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas, ed. Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1964-68), ST 1a 27:4.

<sup>5</sup> ST 1a 28:3.

<sup>6</sup> ST 1a 29:4.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine LaCugna, *God For Us*, (USA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p.145.

## 1 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology 3

2 according to Thomas, real relations in God are based on action, that  
 3 is, activity immanent in God, not actions outside God such as creation.  
 4 Thus the divine persons are distinguished by the two processions,  
 5 being begotten and being spirated, which produce four real relations:  
 6 (fatherhood, sonship, spiration, procession).<sup>8</sup>

7 However, although LaCugna argues that this stress on action in God  
 8 is welcome and his links between the economic and immanent Trinity  
 9 are helpful, she maintains that unlike her, he emphasises the imma-  
 10 nent rather than economic Trinity, as ‘names pertaining to the Trinity  
 11 derive from God’s nature, not from God’s self-revelation in the econ-  
 12 omy. The names Father, Son, and Spirit express not God’s relation  
 13 to the creature but intradivine relations’.<sup>9</sup>

14 Starting from this unity rather than from the hypostases and their  
 15 origin is contrary to the methodology of Lossky. For, as Gregory  
 16 Nazianzen, from whom Lossky takes much of his trinitarian thought,  
 17 says, the *ousia* ‘no man ever yet has discovered or can discover’,<sup>10</sup>  
 18 and this is why ‘the begetting of God must be honoured by si-  
 19 lence . . . it was in a manner known to the Father who begot, and to  
 20 the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a  
 21 cloud, and escapes your dim sight’.<sup>11</sup>

22 Thus Lossky claims that

23  
 24 the only characteristic of the hypostases which we can state to be ex-  
 25 clusively proper to each, and which is never found in orders, by reason  
 26 of their consubstantiality is thus the relation of origin. Nevertheless,  
 27 this relation must be understood in an apophatic sense. It is above all  
 28 a negation, showing us that the Father is neither the Son nor the Holy  
 29 Spirit, that the Son is neither the Father nor the Spirit; that the Holy  
 30 Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Otherwise to regard it would  
 31 be to submit the Trinity to a category of Aristotelian logic, that of  
 32 relation. Understood apophatically, the relation of origin describes the  
 33 difference but nevertheless does not indicate the manner of the divine  
 34 processions.<sup>12</sup>

35 However, there may be not such a great disagreement on terminology  
 36 between Thomas and Lossky after all. Williams offers:

37  
 38 a final note on the detail of Thomas’s argument: as is well-known,  
 39 he defines the divine persons as ‘subsistent relations’, a term that  
 40 has puzzled many modern theologians. It derives from the vocabu-  
 41 lary of Augustine, but Thomas gives it a more precise technical twist,

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 43 <sup>8</sup> LaCugna, p.154.

44 <sup>9</sup> LaCugna, p.157.

45 <sup>10</sup> [28:17], *The Theological Orations*, p.147.

46 <sup>11</sup> [29:8], *The Theological Orations*, p.165.

47 <sup>12</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (NY: St. Vladimirs  
 Seminary Press, 1976), pp.54-5.

#### 4 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

so much so that a not very sympathetic Eastern Orthodox commentator, Vladimir Lossky, can accuse him of simply identifying person with relation, and thus evacuating any content for the persons as real agents.<sup>13</sup>

Although it could be said that Lossky should take a more apophatic view of Aquinas' theology, as Rowan Williams suggests, stating that 'the language of subsistent relations is simply a way of saying that the actual reality of the "essence" (what it's like to be God) is nothing other than the threefold pattern of relation that we begin to grasp if we put together the history of revelation and the logic of considering God's life as "intellectual", in some sense self-aware.'<sup>14</sup>

This leads into Lossky's critique of the *filioque* as he prefers relations of origin that are not tied to relations of opposition, for according to him even if relations of opposition are based on relations of origin, they are intended to show opposition in the nature of the one God. For Lossky, this involves seeing the Godhead as one essence/substance rather than 3 distinct hypostases. In this subordination of the persons to the substance Lossky sees a loss of the place of the Father as the source of the Trinity, losing the monarchy of the Father and thus affecting the generation and procession of the Son and Spirit. Lossky states that

the Greeks saw in the formula of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son a tendency to stress the unity of nature at the expense of the real distinction between the persons. The relationships of origin which do not bring the Son and Spirit back to the unique source, to the Father – the one as begotten, the other as proceeding – become a system of relationships within one essence: something logically posterior to the essence.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, he sees this as a sign that 'the West had already lost the true idea of the Person of the Holy Spirit, relegating Him to a secondary position by making Him into a kind of lieutenant or deputy of the Son'.<sup>16</sup>

Thus for Lossky, in Western thought the hypostatic characteristics (paternity, generation, procession) are swallowed up in the essence where 'the principle of unity within the Trinity, these relationships, instead of being characteristics of the hypostases, are identified with them'.<sup>17</sup> This Lossky sees as unnecessary, as 'these two persons are

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, 'What does love know? St Thomas on the Trinity', *New Blackfriars*, 2001, Vol.82 (964), pp.260-272, p.267.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, p.268.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p.57.

<sup>16</sup> Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, (NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p.103.

<sup>17</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p.57.

2 distinguished by the different mode of their origin: the Son is begot-  
3 ten, the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father. This is sufficient to  
4 distinguish them'.<sup>18</sup> He continues 'as St. Thomas was later to write:  
5 "Persona est relatio", inner relationship of the essence which it di-  
6 versifies. It can scarcely be denied that there is a difference between  
7 this Trinitarian conception and that of Gregory Nazianzen with his  
8 "Thrice-repeated Holy, meeting in one ascription of the title Lord  
9 and God"<sup>19</sup>. However, as Williams notes, this is not actually what  
10 Aquinas is saying, for 'Aquinas nowhere says Persona est relatio (as  
11 Lossky alleges) . . . his discussion in S.T., I.29, iv turns upon whether  
12 persona refers to the divine nature or not, and he concludes that . . . in  
13 discourse about God, "person" designates something distinct by virtue  
14 of relation of origin and subsisting as a really distinct hypostasis of  
15 the divine nature'.<sup>20</sup> For Aquinas, person 'signifying' relation has an  
16 apophatic quality to it that you would think Lossky would welcome.  
17 Furthermore, Lossky's objection might be answered by rooting both  
18 the diversity and reality of the persons in movement within the di-  
19 vine nature. Nevertheless, does this fundamental misunderstanding of  
20 Aquinas' theology invalidate Lossky's criticisms?

21 As stated above, Lossky fears that this emphasis on the unity  
22 exists at the expense of the monarchy of the Father, for 'the Greek  
23 Fathers always maintained that the principle of unity in the Trinity  
24 is the person of the father . . . he lays down their relations of origin –  
25 generation and procession – in regard to the unique principle of  
26 Godhead. This is why the East has always opposed the formula  
27 of *filioque* which seems to impair the monarchy of the Father'.<sup>21</sup>  
28 However, like LaCugna, Williams sees Aquinas' Trinitarian thought  
29 as emphasising the dynamic action within the unity of God, for

30  
31 God loves God, loves what is understood in the eternal Word, loves  
32 the always pre-existing self-giving of the Father . . . God is a movement  
33 towards God, God's wanting of God so that God may be fully and  
34 blissfully God, may enjoy the 'natural good' proper to divine nature.<sup>22</sup>

35  
36 This is taken from Aquinas' remarks that 'what proceeds in God as  
37 love does not proceed as Begotten or Son, but rather as Spirit. This  
38 word implies vital movement and impulse, in the sense that man is  
39 said to be driven or impelled by love to do this or that'.<sup>23</sup>

40 Williams notes that for Lossky it is

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43 <sup>18</sup> Lossky, p.55.

44 <sup>19</sup> Lossky, p.57.

45 <sup>20</sup> Williams, *The theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky*, p.150.

46 <sup>21</sup> Lossky, p.58.

47 <sup>22</sup> Williams, 'What does love know?', p.265.

<sup>23</sup> ST 1a 27:4.

1 6 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

2 bad enough that the persons should be thus reduced to relations; worse  
3 still that these should be relations of opposition, relations of logical  
4 opposition and mutual exclusiveness between two terms. What is  
5 left of the pattern of purely personal relations between all three per-  
6 sons, dependent upon the “self-transcending” love of the Father in His  
7 “monarchy”?<sup>24</sup>

8 However, in the light of his own analysis of relations in Aquinas,  
9 Williams judges that the thought of Lossky is in fact ‘a profoundly  
10 reactionary, regressive approach. It fails to advance beyond the  
11 homousios of Nicaea, remaining on the level of discourse about  
12 substantial unity’,<sup>25</sup> whereas in Aquinas his ‘interpretation of persona  
13 represents a very important advance in terminological precision,  
14 decisively removing the ambiguities associated with a term like  
15 hypostasis’.<sup>26</sup>

16 Thus, Williams states that Lossky’s complaint about the scholastic  
17 understanding of hypostasis

18  
19 is largely invalidated by the fact, which he ignores, of the greater ter-  
20 minological complexity and precision of Latin theology, which allowed  
21 Aquinas to distinguish clearly between hypostasis in its common Greek  
22 metaphysical or ontological sense (meaning atomon), and hypostasis  
23 in its theological (Trinitarian and Christological) usage, and to begin  
24 to make explicit the latent “personalist” corollaries of this latter us-  
25 age. The understanding which emerges is one which does allow for a  
26 measure of real trinitarian pluralism.<sup>27</sup>

27 However, Williams also appears to claim that dialogue between the  
28 two understandings is difficult, as one would never appreciate the  
29 nuances of the other, for ‘in an important sense, it does not matter  
30 if Aquinas’s terminology is patient of an interpretation congenial to  
31 Lossky, since there remains a fundamental difference in what they  
32 regard as the proper starting-point for theology.’<sup>28</sup> For example, I  
33 suggest that if one starts from the three hypostases and sees relations  
34 as the consequences of having these three hypostases (as in Gregory  
35 Nazianzen’s analogies of three suns intermingled and Peter, Paul and  
36 James, and Gregory of Nyssa’s tract “On Not Three Gods”), the  
37 Trinity is subject to the same criticisms of insularity that Lossky  
38 lays at Western theology. The relations in Lossky’s theology are so  
39 focused on each other that they do not exist as a working out in the  
40 world but as that amongst each other; they do not lead to a greater  
41 capacity of openness in the world but instead turn back in amongst  
42

43  
44 <sup>24</sup> Williams, *The theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky*, p.135.

45 <sup>25</sup> Williams, p.136.

46 <sup>26</sup> Williams, p.152.

47 <sup>27</sup> Williams, p.154.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, p.155.

1  
2 themselves. This leads to a greater division between the *theologia*  
3 and *oikonomia* than would be found in Western thought.

4 This has an impact on the *filioque*, for if there is a deep separation  
5 between God in Godself and God in the world, then the filioque  
6 could only apply to the latter. However, another important part of  
7 Lossky's critique is that 'the work of the lifegiving Spirit is obscured  
8 by His supposed subordination to the Son, and the omnipresence  
9 of God's glory in His world is obscured by the rejection of the  
10 divine energies'.<sup>29</sup> The *filioque* for Lossky does three irredeemable  
11 things. It decreases the personalism of God; lessens the efficacy of  
12 the apophatic approach and does not operate with the divine ener-  
13 gies. It removes devotion from theology, as Williams notes that for  
14 Lossky "'Filioquisme" negates the apophatic attitude, and capitulates  
15 to the seductions of philosophy'.<sup>30</sup> Instead, having the Son being  
16 'generated' and the Spirit 'processing' ensures that

17  
18 the balance between the hypostases and the ousia is safeguarded. If  
19 the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father 'and from the Son' (filioque)  
20 as from one single principle, essential unity takes precedence over  
21 personal diversity, and the Persons become relations of the essence,  
22 differentiating themselves from one another by mutual opposition.<sup>31</sup>

23 In having this double procession

24  
25 the unity of God is no longer a personal principle but an intellectual  
26 construct. Properly, the divine simplicity (itself a philosophical rather  
27 than a religious notion, and so of secondary importance) is a matter  
28 of the perfect unity of the Trinity in the monarchy of the Father:  
29 scholasticism, in refusing to distinguish between essence and energy,  
30 does away with the freedom of God, His capacity to "transcend His  
31 transcendence" and go out from His essence in relation.<sup>32</sup>

32 I suggest, then, that Lossky's rejection of the *filioque* can only be  
33 properly considered in the wider context of the distinction between  
34 essence and energies, to which we now turn.

35  
36 Essence and Energies

37 According to Lossky, in Orthodox theology, 'God manifests Himself  
38 by His operations or energies'<sup>33</sup> that are separate from God's essence  
39 which remains hidden in the cloud of unknowing. Lossky here relies  
40 on the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory Palamas, clarifying  
41 that 'essence and energies are not, for Palamas, two parts of God,  
42

43  
44 <sup>29</sup> Williams, p.132.

45 <sup>30</sup> Williams, p.132.

46 <sup>31</sup> Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, p.88.

47 <sup>32</sup> Williams, p.159.

<sup>33</sup> Lossky, *The Vision of God*, (NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), p.78.

1 8 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

2 as some modern critics still imagine, but two different modes of the  
3 existence of God, within His nature and outside His nature; the same  
4 God remains totally inaccessible in his essence – and communicates  
5 himself totally by grace'.<sup>34</sup> In doing so he reveals the importance of  
6 tradition, again tracing his thought back to the Fathers, who 'affirmed  
7 from the beginning a distinction between God's unknowable essence  
8 and God's energies through which a real communion with God is  
9 possible.'<sup>35</sup> As Lossky states 'it was the need to establish a dogmatic  
10 basis for union with God which impelled the Eastern Church to  
11 formulate her teaching on the distinction between God's essence and  
12 His energies'.<sup>36</sup>

13 This is part of the separation between God and the world, between  
14 the transcendent essence, as 'in creation the consubstantial Trinity  
15 makes itself known in the energies proper to its nature'.<sup>37</sup> These  
16 energies are 'the outpourings of the divine nature which cannot set  
17 bounds to itself, for God is more than essence. The energies might  
18 be described as that mode of existence of the Trinity which is outside  
19 of its inaccessible essence. God thus exists both in His essence and  
20 outside of His essence'.<sup>38</sup>

21 However, this movement outward is distinct from what occurs  
22 within the Trinity as 'the Son and the Holy Spirit are, so to say,  
23 personal processions, and the energies natural processions. The en-  
24 ergies are inseparable from the nature, and the nature is inseparable  
25 from the three Persons'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore this is the only way in which  
26 humanity can know God, for 'this doctrine makes it possible to un-  
27 derstand how the trinity can remain incommunicable in essence and  
28 at the same time come and dwell within us, according to the promise  
29 of Christ'.<sup>40</sup>

30 As noted above, this distinction preserves the reliance on apophati-  
31 cism within Lossky's theology. Lossky sees apophaticism as 'a way  
32 towards mystical union with God, whose nature remains incompre-  
33 hensible to us'.<sup>41</sup> He notes that regarding knowledge of God

34  
35 in contemplating any object we analyse its properties: it is this which  
36 enables us to form concepts. But this analysis can in no case exhaust  
37 the content of the object of perception. There will always remain  
38

39  
40 <sup>34</sup> Lossky, p.157.

41 <sup>35</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Divine energies or divine personhood: Vladimir Lossky and  
42 John Zizoulas on conceiving the transcendent and immanent God." *Modern Theology* 19,  
43 no. 3 (2003): 357-385. p.357.

44 <sup>36</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p.71.

45 <sup>37</sup> Lossky, p.72

46 <sup>38</sup> Lossky, p.73.

47 <sup>39</sup> Lossky, p.86.

<sup>40</sup> Lossky, p.86.

<sup>41</sup> Lossky, p.28.



## 1 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology 9

2 an “irrational residue” which escapes analysis and which cannot be  
3 expressed in concepts; it is the unknowable depth of things, that which  
4 constitutes their true, indefinable essence. In regard to God, these reveal  
5 his energies which descend towards us yet do not draw us closer to  
6 his essence, which is inaccessible.<sup>42</sup>

7  
8 The importance of apophaticism within Lossky’s theology is that  
9 it is a key part of his methodology: ‘apophaticism . . . is, above all,  
10 an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God’.<sup>43</sup>  
11 This is why Papanikolaou notes that ‘apophasis is never, for Lossky,  
12 a move in a conceptual game, bound up as it is with metanoia  
13 of the intellect, and indeed, not only of the intellect, bound up  
14 as it is with the metanoia of the whole human person’.<sup>44</sup> It is, as  
15 Chrestos claims ‘our refusal to exhaust knowledge of the truth in  
16 its formulations’.<sup>45</sup> As discussed below, this metanoia present in  
17 Lossky’s thought stands in contrast to what he perceives as the  
18 over-philosophising of Western thought, ‘to Lossky, the problem  
19 with the intellectualisation of theology is that it precludes *real* union  
20 with God, the goal of all theological discourse in the Incarnation’.<sup>46</sup>  
21 However, as Papanikolaou further notes ‘the problem for Lossky is  
22 that he does not have the conceptual apparatus to link his theological  
23 notion of person with his apophaticism, primarily because of the  
24 priority given to apophaticism in theological method’.<sup>47</sup>

25 Papanikolaou sees further problems in Lossky’s apophaticism, as  
26 affirming an unknown essence, distinct from energies, undermines  
27 the argument for the monarchia and personality of the Father, and  
28 thus this hyperessence comes close to a western idea of prior unity  
29 of substance. Thus, if the distinction of essence from energies under-  
30 mines the personality of the Father, it also undermines the difference  
31 in relations that Lossky wants to establish through reflections on ori-  
32 gins, and thus a problem lies with Lossky’s objection to Aquinas’  
33 attempt to comprehend the how as well as the why of the Trinitarian  
34 relations. Lossky

35  
36  
37 rejects any speculation on the “how” of relations in the Trinity for  
38 fear of making hypostatic diversity depend on some thing. Ironically,  
39 this rejection runs the risk of depersonalisation, the one thing Lossky  
40 sought to avoid. The Father as the source of the Trinity implies a rich

41  
42 <sup>42</sup> Lossky, p.33.

43 <sup>43</sup> Lossky, p.39.

44 <sup>44</sup> ~~Papanikolaou~~ **Correct Reference is Williams, p.2**

45 <sup>45</sup> Giannaras Chrestos, *Elements of faith: an introduction to Orthodox theology*. (Edin-  
burgh: T.&T. Clark, 1991), p.17.

46 <sup>46</sup> Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, p.29.

47 <sup>47</sup> Papanikolaou, p.92.

1 10 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

2 concept of person as freedom and love, one which Lossky himself  
3 attempted to clarify later in his career.<sup>48</sup>

4  
5 Lossky notes that this link between apophaticism and energies is im-  
6 possible in any other theology, as ‘it became impossible for Roman  
7 Catholic theologians to admit the energetic manifestation of the Trin-  
8 ity as something not contradicting the truth of divine simplicity’.<sup>49</sup>  
9 However, the advantage is not always with Lossky, for Papanikolaou  
10 notes that

11 There is a confusion in Lossky’s doctrine of God which results from  
12 attempting to affirm simultaneously a transcendent and immanent God  
13 based on the essence/energies distinction, and a Triune God whose  
14 diversity is rooted in the *monarchia* of the Father. To affirm, as Lossky  
15 does, that one cannot speak of God in the realm of *theologia*, that God  
16 in Godself is shrouded in apophaticism, is, ironically, to continue to  
17 make “essence” language primary in Godtalk . . . one cannot speak of  
18 God as Trinity other than to express it as a “primordial fact”.<sup>50</sup>

19 For Lossky the Western lack of apophaticism also ties into his dissat-  
20 isfaction with the filioque as he ‘sees a peculiarly close link between  
21 the Holy Spirit and the divine energies. In the economy of grace, it  
22 is the Spirit who realizes in the created world the activity of God’.<sup>51</sup>  
23 The crux of the matter for Lossky is that the essence of the Trinity  
24 should not be so open to our thought, the whole concept instead  
25 should be ‘a cross for human ways of thought. The apophatic ascent  
26 is a mounting of Calvary’,<sup>52</sup> it should be experienced and participated  
27 in, not philosophised over as he sees it to be in Western theology.  
28 As Lossky states regarding the reasoning behind the filioque, ‘one  
29 has the impression that the heights of theology have been deserted  
30 in order to descend to the level of religious philosophy’.<sup>53</sup>

31  
32 *Participation*

33 Lossky sees western theologians as neglecting an important aspect of  
34 being a theologian. In the *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*  
35 Lossky speaks first and foremost of the importance of theology as  
36 mysticism, for ‘the eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinc-  
37 tion between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of  
38 the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the Church’.<sup>54</sup> Thus  
39 ‘theology must be not so much a quest of positive notions about the  
40

41  
42 <sup>48</sup> Papanikolaou, p.70.

43 <sup>49</sup> Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, p.96.

44 <sup>50</sup> Papanikolaou, p.377.

45 <sup>51</sup> Williams, *The theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky*, p.160.

46 <sup>52</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p.66.

47 <sup>53</sup> Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, p.80.

<sup>54</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p.8.

## 1 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology 11

2 divine being as an experience which surpasses all understanding'.<sup>55</sup>  
3 This is especially important for the theologian, as 'no one who does  
4 not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian'.<sup>56</sup>

5 Participation is more than a practice, it is as essential for Lossky's  
6 methodology as apophaticism is, for 'in the tradition of the East-  
7 ern Church there is no place for a theology, and even less for a  
8 mysticism, of the divine essence. The goal of Orthodox spiritual-  
9 ity, the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven, is not the vision of  
10 the essence, but, above all, a participation in the divine life of the  
11 Holy Trinity'.<sup>57</sup> Thus Lossky's Trinitarian thought is impacted by  
12 participation as it becomes 'a theology of union, a mystical theology  
13 which appeals to experience, and which presupposes a continuous  
14 and progressive series of changes in created nature, a more and more  
15 intimate communion of the human person with the Holy Trinity'.<sup>58</sup>  
16 Yet, as noted above, we cannot participate in the essence of God,  
17 therefore the distinction between essence and energies is important  
18 here, for if we were to participate with God in God's essence, then  
19 we would become God, 'there would no longer be Trinity, but muri-  
20 hypostatos... for he would have as many hypostases as there would  
21 be persons participating in His essence'.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, we only partic-  
22 ipate in the energies, which are manifested through the work of  
23 the Spirit. This union is very different from the other unions with  
24 God that Lossky discusses, as 'the union to which we are called is  
25 neither hypostatic [Christ]... nor substantial [Trinity]... it is union  
26 with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in  
27 the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence  
28 of God'.<sup>60</sup>

29 A correct theology, in Lossky's eyes, cannot escape from this, as  
30

31 we *are* called to participate in the divine nature. We are therefore  
32 compelled to recognize in God an ineffable distinction, other than  
33 that between His essence and His persons, according to which He is,  
34 under different aspects, both totally inaccessible and at the same time  
35 accessible. This distinction is that between the essence of God, or  
36 His nature, properly co-called, which is inaccessible, unknowable and  
37 incommunicable; and the energies or divine operations, forces proper  
38 to and inseparable from God's essence, in which He goes forth from  
39 Himself, manifests, communicates, and gives Himself.<sup>61</sup>  
40  
41

42 <sup>55</sup> Lossky, p.38.

43 <sup>56</sup> Lossky, p.39.

44 <sup>57</sup> Lossky, p.65.

45 <sup>58</sup> Lossky, p.67.

46 <sup>59</sup> Lossky, p.70.

47 <sup>60</sup> Lossky, p.87.

<sup>61</sup> Lossky, p.70.

## 1 12 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology

2 Therefore 'the doctrine of the energies, ineffably distinct from the  
3 essence, is the dogmatic basis of the real character of all mystical  
4 experience'.<sup>62</sup>

5 So whilst for Lossky, participation in the energies ensures that the  
6 world and God are linked, through the deifying work of the Spirit  
7 as first defined in Gregory Nazianzen's Theological Orations, there  
8 are issues with this train of thought. For if we participate only in  
9 the energies of God, is this not the same as preserving the sharp  
10 distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, between  
11 *theologia* and *oikonomia* that Lossky accuses Western thought of  
12 doing? For if there is this difference between economic and immanent  
13 Trinity, then participation is reduced to being only in the energies not  
14 the essence of God, then we are not really dealing with God when  
15 we speak of energies, not a conscious act within the world but an  
16 afterglow of the glory within the Trinity in itself, but in 'that mode of  
17 existence of the Trinity which is outside of its inaccessible essence',<sup>63</sup>  
18 the light from the three suns, to borrow an image, which does not  
19 exist 'on account of creatures, despite the fact that it is through His  
20 energies, which penetrate everything that exists, that God creates and  
21 operates'.<sup>64</sup> They are in fact understood as 'subsequent to the essence  
22 and are its natural manifestations, but as external to the very being  
23 of the Trinity'.<sup>65</sup> The concepts of Trinity, apophaticism, energies  
24 and essences and participation do not interrelate in Lossky's thought  
25 perichoretically. Instead, there is too much distinction and separation  
26 in Lossky's thought, between the immanent and economic Trinity  
27 due to the distinction between essences and energies, between us and  
28 God through apophaticism and the emphasis on participation still  
29 relies on this distinction between God and God, between essences  
30 and energies.

31 However, in Lossky's theology he appears to want to have partici-  
32 pation, apophaticism, essence and energies and a Trinity that is  
33 marked by diversity rather than unity. Yet this bifurcation between  
34 energies and essence prevents participation and the apophaticism en-  
35 tailed by this separation of the essence and energies means that we  
36 have a unity emphasized at the expense of the diversity, despite  
37 Lossky's criticism of the filioque for doing the very same thing. The  
38 emphasis on the diversity means that the Trinity does not interre-  
39 late within itself as dynamically as it does in Aquinas' thought. If  
40 Lossky had a more dynamic view of the trinitarian relations, and if  
41 there was not such a division between God in Godself and God as  
42 relating to the world, then that would enable greater participation in  
43

44 <sup>62</sup> Lossky, p.86.

45 <sup>63</sup> Lossky, p.73.

46 <sup>64</sup> Lossky, p.74.

47 <sup>65</sup> Lossky, p.81.

## 1 A Critical Account of the Place of Divine Relations in the Theology 13

2 God based on movement within God, a movement of like to like. For  
3 all Lossky's emphasis on participation on our part, there is little talk  
4 about it in God, instead there is the view of the Trinity as absolute  
5 stability, for 'if the very foundation of created being is change, and  
6 the transition from non-being to being, if a creature is contingent by  
7 nature, the Trinity is an absolute stability'.<sup>66</sup>

8 Thus, in examining these key parts of the theology of Vladimir  
9 Lossky, the role that the divine relations plays is supposed to facilitate  
10 these other doctrines, such as the distinction between essence and  
11 energies, apophaticism and participation, but from a close reading of  
12 the interrelation of these doctrines, I have to conclude that this is a  
13 Trinitarian theology that emphasizes the diversity of the persons of  
14 the Trinity whilst not sufficiently expressing their internal coherence.  
15 Such coherence might well be expressed through an idea of internal,  
16 relational movements within the one divine nature which Aquinas  
17 attempts to articulate with concepts of 'relations of opposition' and  
18 in the rather apophatic language of 'subsistent relations'. I should  
19 admit that in raising these criticisms I may in fact be doing what  
20 Lossky criticises certain theologians for doing, ignoring the deep-  
21 seated link between theology and mysticism, and thus whilst there is  
22 much to be discussed with regard to Lossky's Trinitarian thought, we  
23 may lose sight of the aim of Lossky's overall thought, which is not to  
24 systematize God, but to promote a deeper understanding of God and  
25 lead us to participate in the energies of the divine Trinity. However,  
26 I would conclude by saying that in order to worship God properly,  
27 one needs a healthy, consistent theology, and Lossky's Trinitarian  
28 formulations do not offer this.

29  
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<sup>66</sup> Lossky, p.45.

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