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## **Immanence and Transcendence through the Seven Councils\***

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Once "divine transcendence" is conceived of not in spatial terms as if indicating a realm apart, but rather in an ontological sense as recognizing the absolute other-ness of the divine nature, thus allowing for the divine nature a freedom from every categorization and all restrictions which confine other phenomena, and allowing for the divine nature a potential for unlimited activity,<sup>1</sup> then, the dynamics of "divine immanence" may be perceived not as a paradox but as a logical and proper result. Divine immanence can be recognized as reflected in this way consistently (it seems to me) through the Seven Ecumenical Councils.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen when these Councils are viewed thematically through three phases that follow sequentially from one ontological plane to the next: (a) from participation among the divine Persons of the Trinity in the Godhead; (b) through participation of divinity with humanity in Jesus Christ; and (c) to participation of the divine in the physical cosmos. The reciprocal dynamic is inherent throughout as the creation participates within the fullness of the divine.

(a) *In the Godhead.* The initial phase concentrates on divine participation and coexistence in the Godhead itself. These Councils recognize the Persons of the Trinity as integral realities, each Person fully divine in essence, each indwelling perfectly with the Others to comprise the One God. The First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, AD 325) expresses the Son's undiminished divine essence, one essence with the Father, against the heterodoxy of Arius. The latter posited an ontological divide between the Persons of the Trinity by rendering the Son a creation, albeit a pre-eternal creation, of the Father. The

Second Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, AD 381) expresses the undiminished divine essence of the Holy Spirit against the heterodoxy of Macedonius, who shifted the ontological divide by positing it instead with the Father and the Son on the one side, while the Holy Spirit was diminished on the other side as a creation. Thus in these initial Ecumenical Councils, the Persons are recognized each as perfectly divine and co-existent.

This has an effect upon the reciprocal dynamic, as the First and Second Ecumenical Councils emphasize that divinity is present without diminution in the act of creation by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Creation implies no lessening of divinity, neither through emanation nor through a Demiurge. In contrast Arius and Macedonius both posited a Demiurge, by rendering the Logos in the one instance, the Holy Spirit in the other instance, as a lesser divinity than God the Father. Constructs such as those by Arius and Macedonius would preclude the participation by creation in the fullness of the divine Life, because an intermediate would separate; a Demiurge would stand between. Against this separation, the initial Ecumenical Councils affirm that creation derives from, and is sustained by, no less than complete divinity: therefore, it follows that creation is in direct contact with undiminished divinity.

(b) *Through Jesus Christ.* The next phase concentrates on the union of the divine with the human in the Incarnate Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. The Third to Sixth Ecumenical Councils emphasize the union of natures as a thoroughly pervasive union in Christ. The Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, AD 431) emphasizes this in opposition against the heterodoxy of Nestorius who kept divinity and humanity conceptually apart, as he posited merely a contiguous union between them. The Fifth Council (Constantinople, AD 553) counters a resurgence of Nestorianism by censuring the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia that were being circulated in place of Nestorius's own; and by stressing that through the Incarnation the second Person of the Holy Trinity actually did suffer, did die, and was resurrected in the physical body which he did assume and did sanctify.

In a complementary dialectic with the Third and Fifth Councils, the Fourth and Sixth further clarify the hypostatic union, now against the opposite extreme which confused the integral realities in Jesus Christ. During the Fourth Council (Chalcedon, AD 451), this confusion is associated particularly with Eutyches, who appeared to

diminish the human nature in Jesus in order to accommodate it in union with the divine. The Fourth Council, in response, emphasizes the undiminished human nature along with the undiminished divine nature, as integral realities alike in Christ. Humanity and divinity remain each unconfused with each other, while yet inseparable, within the union. The Sixth Council (Constantinople, AD 680-681) counters a similar confusion as manifested now in the Monothelite heterodoxy which diminished the reality of Christ's human volition in favor of the divine will alone.

Thus in the Third to Fifth Councils, undiminished divinity is acknowledged to be in an unconfused while indivisible unity with complete humanity (body and soul) in Jesus Christ. The reciprocal dynamic – integral humanity participating in unity within undiminished divinity – is inherent when the Councils during this phase resist the Eutychian-like and Monothelite confusions, which diminish Christ's human nature. The reciprocal dynamic is inherent more-so when these Councils resist the opposite extreme (resisting it perhaps even more vigorously), as the Nestorian and Nestorianizing separation between the natures, which would render them into merely a contiguous union, would have consequences about our reconciliation to God in Christ: the processes of salvation would then need to be interpreted in terms other than dynamic participation. Concepts of election or merit would become predominant instead, while the dynamics of participation and theosis would be either confined to ethical development or altogether lost.

(c) *Into the physical cosmos.* The final phase begins with the relationship between prototype and icon. Any confusion of substance is (again) rejected, now particularly because this type of relational-participation is not the same as the hypostatic union (the icon and its prototype are not conceived of as one-in-the-same in any sense). Yet, sanctity occurs through the icons by virtue of their prototypes, and the icons themselves thus become sanctified; as the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, AD 787) explains in defense against the Iconoclasts. This Council also defends the veneration of relics. The Iconoclasts, in contrast, denied that divinity could ever be present and active within created physical nature except in the elements of the Eucharist. The defense against them as provided by the Seventh Council is reiterated in the subsequent Council of Constantinople (AD 843), after another surge of Iconoclasm. Thus in the Seventh

Council at Nicaea and the subsequent at Constantinople, the activity of divinity within physical phenomena is affirmed without confusion of integral realities.

It is significant that the defense is articulated further in the later Councils of Constantinople (AD 1341 and 1351). The further articulation became a pastoral necessity against the heterodoxy of Barlaam. Similar to Nestorius, Macedonius, and Arius before him, Barlaam interpreted the transcendence of the divine nature as if it commanded a placement of the divine in a realm apart, contiguous perhaps while apart nonetheless; and the consequences were basically the same. In response, these Constantinopolitan Councils explain that the divine essence (οὐσία) remains altogether other than created nature and unconfused with it; yet creation is sustained by the uncreated divine energies (ἐνέργεια) without diminution of the divine nature.<sup>3</sup>

These later councils (AD 1341 and 1351), in effect, articulate the implications that are inherent in the initial Ecumenical Councils (AD 325 and 381). In the initial Councils, creation is affirmed as occurring through the operation of undiminished divinity. A millennium later, the same perception is affirmed: that creation is sustained through the operation of undiminished divinity. Now the implications for the complete human experience are articulated particularly as these later councils affirm, and defend, the potential for the total human being, created in body and soul, to experience the undiminished divinity of the Creator, as our own integral nature participates within the uncreated divine energies that sustain the cosmos.

This reciprocal dynamic – as complete humanity participates in undiminished divinity – is a clear extension from the concern about the saints' relics, for the sanctification of the saints' bodies occurs through the saints' participation within the divine; and an extension also from the concern even about icons, for they also are material objects that can be sanctified through participation, albeit a relational-participation in the latter case.

*Conclusion.* Implications exist here about the divine presence in physical nature. One may therefore suggest that insights are available here for the ecological crisis today, both to identify more accurately the origins of this crisis and to contribute viable concepts toward its resolution. The origins may be identified, to a significant degree, with a loss of sensitivity about the divine presence in physical nature – a loss not in conformity with patristic doctrine but in

divergence. The contribution toward a resolution might be offered by emphasizing this sensitivity boldly today as a definite aspect of patristic theology – an aspect which has often been ignored. One may furthermore suggest that insights are also available here into the deep engrafting of Christianity that has occurred in areas of the non-Western world where a sensitivity about divine immanence was a vital traditional perception: corresponding to, without necessarily being equivalent with, this patristic perception.

*Summary.* Seen thematically in this way – through these sequential phases, proceeding from one ontological plane consistently to the next – the Councils can be understood as having established boundaries against any division which would confine the divine nature apart, and boundaries on the other side against the confusions of integral realities. They consistently set these boundaries against that division on the right and against those confusions on the left; while maintaining the way ahead unobstructed for the actual transcendence of the divine nature beyond any limiting definitions, and thus maintaining the way ahead unobstructed for the boundlessness of divine manifestation and for the limitlessness of divine participation. Can there be a more reasonable approach to the divine than this? – an approach that guards against our limiting the divine. The transcendence of the divine is maintained so completely that the immanence can be espoused, not as a paradox but as a proper and reasonable result.

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper (here adapted), titled "Divine Presence in Physical Nature," was read in the Halki Seminar on "The Environment and Ethics," convened by HRH Prince Philip the Duke of Edinburgh with His All Holiness Bartholomew the Patriarch of Constantinople, 15 June 1995. The current version was read as a communication in the Twelfth International Conference on Patristic Studies, 25 August 1995. The final revised version will be published as section 2.ii, Chapter 3, in *From Mask to Icon: Transformation in the Arctic* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gregory Palamas, Λόγος ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱεροῶς Ἡσυχαστῶν 3. 1. 29 and 3. 2. 9, ed. J. Meyendorff (Louvain, 1959), pp. 612, 659. Cf. John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity: an Essay in Dialectical Theism*, The Gifford Lectures 1983-4 (London, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Only the primary issues from the Councils will be mentioned to indicate this theme; and the writer is aware that readers are already familiar with these issues. The contribution here may (it is hoped) be found in the thematic organization of these Councils into the three phases and be found also in the emphasis on the dynamics of divine participation, especially (what will be termed) the "reciprocal dynamic" as creation participates within the immanent divine. Within a wider thematic development, encompassing more of the breadth of the history of doctrine, attention would be given to the subtleties of the polemics in the Councils, of course; and the historical depth would be extended: for a single

example (while reference will be made here to significant councils which were convened subsequent to the Seventh) reference would also be made to the articulations by Irenaeus of Lyons before the First Ecumenical Council, particularly as he wrote against the dualism of the Gnostics.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria, *Λόγος περί τῆς Ἐνανθρωπήσεως* 46.24-25, ed. R. Thomson (Oxford, 1971), p. 236; Basil the Great, Ep. 234 [to Amphilocheus], in *Ἐπιστολαί*, ed. Y. Courtonne (Paris, 1966), vol.3, pp. 41-42; John Chrysostom, *Περί ἀκαταλήπτου πρὸς Ἀνομοίον* 1 .280-281, ed. A. Malingrey, Sources Chrétiennes 28 (Paris, 1970), vol.1, p. 124. See Chrysostom, *ibid.*, 2 .359-361, 2 .370-371 and 4 .113-115, ed. Malingrey, pp. 170, 172, 238. Also see Maximus the Confessor who developed much the same theme in terms of λόγου.