

David Bradshaw

**Divine Energies and Divine Action: Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction**

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In his renowned book *The Orthodox Church*, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, Timothy Ware, wrote that Western Christians – Roman and Reformed – perhaps do not agree about the answers, but they at least start with the same theological questions, while the Eastern Orthodox deal with a different set of questions altogether. Professor David Bradshaw’s book reflects this observation all too well, since Western Christianity tackles the question of divine energies almost exclusively when studying orthodoxy, even if there is an encouraging trend of Westerners addressing this issue from a practical interest in the topic itself. As a Protestant pastor-theologian, I believe that reading this book has indeed done more for me than just inform me of a mysterious nous of Orthodoxy. It has indeed given me a fresh look at God, his workings in nature, and the Christian life.

Dr. David Bradshaw is a professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky. The book under review contains 204 pages of dense philosophical theology. It has eight chapters, six of which were previously published articles, a bibliography and index spanning 20 pages, a foreword by Paul Gavrilyuk, the editor of IOTA Publications, and the author’s preface.

In his “Introduction,” Dr. Bradshaw explains that it is probably not helpful to tackle the essence-energies distinction by comparing it to medieval scholastic philosophy. He invites his readers to enter the world of Eastern theological thought instead (p. xiii). Historically, the essence-energies distinction emerged in the East but was formalized when a church teacher Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) was defending the Hesychasts tradition of those mystics who claimed to see God’s “uncreated light” through praying Jesus’ prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”). Namely, Eastern theological tradition is especially sensitive and opposed to the notion that people can see or even understand God’s essence, so Palamas wanted to show that this *uncreated light* seen by the Hesychasts is one of God’s energies and not his essence. Of course, as the author notices in his first chapter (“The Concept of Divine Energies”), the Western theological tradition is not overly acquainted with Palamas’ teachings, even though he represents the authoritative teaching of the Eastern Church and the peak of Greek patristic tradition regarding God’s relationship to the world (p. 1). His teaching was conceptually colored by Greek philosophy but also firmly grounded in the New Testament (pp. 2-3).

One of the most important Greek terms in this book is *energeia*. The term was coined by Aristotle. In the beginning, he used it with the meaning of *the active exercise of capacity* in contradistinction to its mere possession. Later he developed the term to describe the Prime Mover, the being who is pure energy (pp. 4-5). Neoplatonism later taught that the first principle, the Good, or the One, is *beyond being* and therefore *beyond intelligibility as well*. In other words, it is unknowable, (p. 6), and yet everything seeks it. And so, Plotinus harmonized Platon's and Aristotle's teaching about the first principle in the way that the One as the Good became the final first principle, while the Prime Mover became the Intellect, the first hypothesis after the One. Since the One is beyond being and the object of the Intellect's reflection, the Intellect cannot comprehend it in its unity but refracts it into a vast array of separate intelligible objects which are Forms. According to Plotinus, Intellect comes forth from the One as an eternal act or energy, or as energy which comes forth from the substance, yet this one is itself an internal act or energy constituting the substance (p. 7).

Moving to the New Testament, Bradshaw shows that the words *energeia* and *energein* almost always denote supernatural actions of spiritual beings like God, Christ, angels, or demons. Both Apostolic Fathers and later theologians continued to use these words to denote the capacity for action and action that imparts energy (pp. 9-10). Contrary to many premodern and modern grammarians, who take *energeisthai* as medial, the author points to newer research that shows that in antiquity this form of the verb was always understood as passive, with the sense of *to be acted upon* or *to be made effective, energized* (p. 11). Having this in mind, when we survey the passages where Paul uses this form of the verb, we can see that these speak of God (although, at times, of Satan too) who empowers a person to action (pp. 12-13), implying synergism in which a human being is empowered by an outside, supernatural power (p. 14).

Church fathers developed these ideas. For example, Basil of Caesarea distinguished between that which is unknowable in God (divine essence) and that that can be knowable, such as God's power, wisdom, and goodness. In this way, he introduced the ontological distinction between God's essence and his energies (p. 15), thus appropriating Plotinus' concepts while rejecting his metaphysics. According to Basil, God's essence denotes "God as he exists within himself and is known only to himself," while divine energies denote "God as he manifests himself to others" (p. 16). One of the rich passages for thinking about this distinction for the church fathers was Exodus 33, where God said to Moses that no one can see him and live, but then Moses can see him from the behind (p. 18). Similarly, the gifts of the Spirit in Paul's Epistles were understood as divine energies in which Christians participate as one part of their deification (p. 19).

Bradshaw believes that the Eastern understanding of divinity is more fruitful than traditional Western theology since it succeeds in being apophatic about

divine essence to the extent that it resists any kind of naming or conceptual imaging, and therefore we can know it exclusively by its energetic expressions which manifest God's character (pp. 21-22). When we comprehend God, we do so only through our conceptions that arise when we think about experiences of our subjective seeing God, and therefore these conceptions are not identical to the object that we comprehend. This differs from the theology of the Western giants like Augustine and Aquinas, who thought that it is impossible to truly comprehend God in our present sinful and corporally limited state, but that we will be capable of seeing divine essence in the glorified state (pp. 23-24). The author mentions other differences as well, for example in understanding God's simplicity which is, in the East, itself divine energy, and not divine essence. This means that God is both simple and beyond simplicity, and therefore his will is not precluded from meaningful interaction with his creatures (pp. 25-26).

The second chapter ("The Divine Energies in the New Testament") tries to show that Paul's use of words *energeia*, *energein*, and *energeisthai* stresses the synergy of divine and human agents (pp. 28-31), one whereby the "activity of one agent becomes that of another" (p. 35). The author points out that this does not mean that Paul taught the distinction between divine energy and essence, but that it is peculiar how much he spoke about such energy (p. 56). The third chapter ("The Divine Glory and the Divine Energies") points us toward the similarities between the talk about God's glory in the Scriptures and divine energies (p. 57). Divine glory is portrayed in the Scriptures as "a special and uniquely fearsome form of the presence of God." There are also at least some indications that God's glory is God (p. 58). Bradshaw returns to Exodus 33, where God's glory is described as God's back parts, and therefore it is and it is not God, or at least, it does not portray him exhaustively. Also, God's glory exists from eternity and is something that can be given to people and in which people can partake as in God's life (pp. 59-61). Yet, it is also a "hidden majesty" in which God manifests himself as the *unknowable* one (p. 64).

"Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?" is the question the fourth chapter tries to answer. Here Bradshaw reviews the attempts of theologians to categorize Palamas' distinction as "Thomistic real minor distinction," (p. 81) as "formal distinction of Duns Scotus," (p. 82) and as *kat' epinoian* distinction (pp. 83-84). He found the last two views to be the most promising, nevertheless, *kat' epinoian* distinction has its problems (pp. 89-99), and while Duns Scotus' formal distinction is probably the closest counterpart to Palamas' understanding (p. 116), Bradshaw thinks it is far better to understand the essence-energies distinction in its terms (p. 117). In chapter five ("The Divine Processions and the Divine Energies"), Bradshaw writes that God's names do not refer to God's essence, but to God's activities, power, and energies (pp. 120-121). Of course, these names do *name* God, but they do so through his energies, through which "God is present

and active among creatures” (p. 123). After giving us a historical overview of the development of the doctrine of energies, the author says that divine energies in the Eastern church fathers have different names, namely *things around God*, *divine processions*, *operations*, *wills*, and the divine *logoi* (pp. 130-131). Nevertheless, they offer “a single comprehensive vision of the relationship of God to creatures, one that exhibits how both the perfections of creatures and their individual uniqueness are due to the indwelling activity of God” (p. 132).

In chapter six (“Perceiving Nature as It Is: The Divine *Logoi* and the Divine Energies”), Bradshaw tackles the question if believers can have a better understanding of nature. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, philosophers believed that human beings’ moral state affects their mental capacities (pp. 135-136). Bradshaw asks the question if this is restricted only to moral issues or does it also influence the way we perceive nature and reality. Psalms denote that we can see both proofs of God’s existence (pp. 137-138) and the manifestations of his glory in nature (p. 139). Bradshaw believes that there are two ways in which it is possible to have “a truer perception of nature” (p. 140). First, through divine *logoi*, which are “the refracted presence of the divine Logos,” since everything “has its own distinctive *logos* which brings it into being and constitutes its ultimate meaning and purpose.” Origen and then Maximus the Confessor developed the notion that we can comprehend *logoi* by living Christian life in its fullness through “prayer, study of Scripture, liturgical and sacramental participation, ascetic self-denial, the struggle against the passions, and the active practice of the virtues, especially charity” (p. 143). Such a life transforms our passions and therefore also our senses so we can “read the divine text written within nature” (p. 144). Second, we can have a truer perception of nature through divine energies, which help us see reality through participation in them (p. 145).

The author wrote the seventh chapter to answer those who criticized the essence-energies distinction in his previous works. He welcomes every critique since we are all on a path of growth in the knowledge of Christian philosophical theology (p. 151). On a similar note, his eighth chapter, “Of Essence, Energies, and Computer Programs,” converses with authors and works that saw the light of day after Bradshaw originally published the essays in this book (p. 171). Thankful for their contributions, he writes that he has taken the time and effort to think through and reformulate his understanding in light of these discussions, especially regarding the divine essence (pp. 181-190). Bradshaw offers an analogy of God’s essence, likening it to a computer program. I will leave the interested reader to further explore the author’s analogy since it goes into many details, requires an intermediate understanding of informatics, and is at times almost as complex as the philosophical concepts it is trying to illuminate. I found his definition of the essence-energies distinction more helpful:

It is the distinction between the inner determinative principle and deepest root of the divine character, on the one hand, and its surface-level manifestations, on the other. The latter include both its natural energies and acts of external manifestation; and the acts of external manifestation, in turn, include both the works that did not begin in time and divine acts that do begin in time, such as the gifts of the Spirit and particular acts of providence. By sharing in these temporal acts, one shares in and comes to know both the temporal energies and the natural energies, although without sharing in or knowing the *ousia* (p. 199).

Professor Bradshaw is optimistic regarding the applicability of the essence-energies distinction to different sciences, as he gives several examples from the fields of metaphysics, philosophy of religion, religious epistemology, but also philosophy of nature (pp. 200-201). He pointed out that some authors tried to reconcile this distinction to Thomism (p. 202), while the theologians applied this key to their various fields, such as questions about the relationship of God and people, ecclesiology, and others (p. 203). In the end, he writes that he believes this topic to be a heritage not only of Eastern Orthodoxy but of Christianity (p. 204).

Since my field of research is systematic and not philosophical theology, I will withhold judgment about the merits of Eastern versus Western theological tradition. Exegetically, I thought that the author jumped to some interpretative conclusions without warrant. For example, he wrote that when God said to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15 that his name is “I am that I am,” God was refusing to tell his name since He cannot be named exhaustively (pp. 65-66). Yet, I did not find his argument convincing in light of God telling Moses in the very passage Bradshaw referred to several times, namely Exodus 33, that “I will proclaim *the name Yahweh* before you,” and also in light of Jesus’ “I am” statements in John (e.g., 4:26; 6:34; 8:12, 24).

The author pointed out that other Christian traditions, both Catholic and Protestant, have already started to appropriate the essence-energies distinction to different fields of knowledge. Since lately *Kairos* has published several articles about discipleship, this book can give an ecumenical contribution to this important topic. For example, Dr. Bradshaw wrote that, even though human beings cannot know God in his essence, God gives them a desire to know him, and this desire then purifies them and makes them like God (p. 70). The desire to know God can be fulfilled only by seeking Christ as the greatest Good by following him experientially (pp. 67-69). This experiential following Christ happens through participation in God’s glory and energies in their many forms (God’s operations, *logoi*, processions) whereby we are transformed into the image of God (the Orthodox doctrine of *deification*).<sup>1</sup> We participate in God’s glory and energies when we

1 For a very helpful Protestant overview of this doctrine and its demystification from unwarranted criticism, see Goran Medved’s two articles in *Kairos*: Medved, Goran. 2019. “Theosis

contemplate about God when his power energizes us to do his will while he is working through us, when we actively share in God's work through the gifts of his Spirit, through "prayer, study of Scripture, liturgical and sacramental participation, ascetic self-denial, the struggle against the passions, and the active practice of the virtues, especially charity" (p. 143) (in Protestant terminology, the means of grace). Furthermore, divine energy is present in "the physical means of salvation," in other words, holy relics and holy places (p. 147). While most protestants will reject these means (especially relics), it will nevertheless be helpful to understand the logic behind the Eastern Orthodox stress on these physical means, even if we disagree with them in this regard. The same is true for the Roman Catholics, for whom it is God's grace that turns nature into channels capable of receiving, transmitting, and cooperating with grace.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to relate this emphasis on the physical aspects of salvation to the growing and, in my opinion, correct emphasis on the new heaven and the new earth as the eschatological *telos* of God's creation (cf. N. T. Wright, Randy Alcorn, and other authors), as opposed to some spiritual existence in "heaven." This understanding goes hand in hand with Bradshaw's Orthodox understanding that even in eternity saints will not be able to see God's essence, but only divine energy, and that they will never reach "a final and comprehensive knowledge" (p. 149), but will forevermore progress in the knowledge of God and of his Creation (p. 150). This changes our perspective not only on our present sanctification through Christian discipleship but also on our future glorification that will be progressive as well, as we will be forevermore perfectly dedicated to a form of Christian discipleship as we seek to grasp God through His gracefully condescended revelation of his essence as we relate to him through Christ and through cooperating with his energies.

In the end, I would like to say that reading the book *Divine Energies and Divine Action* was both challenging and rewarding. As a work in philosophical theology, it will be inaccessible to most Christians without at least some philosophical background. Nevertheless, I believe that most pastors and especially theologians should be able to gain a better understanding of the topic and perhaps even some new ideas in lieu of its application to Christian life and theology.

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(Deification) as a Biblical and Historical Doctrine." *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13, no. 1: 7-38; Medved, Goran. 2019. "Theosis (Deification) as a New Testament and Evangelical Doctrine." *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2: 159-182.

2 Allison, Gregg R. 2014. *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment*. Wheaton: Crossway, 47.