

Torstein T. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 229, € 85.82, ISBN 9780199605965

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In his informative and well-written book, Torstein Tollefsen analyses the concepts of participation and divine activity in several major Patristic authors, including Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, John Philoponus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas. Tollefsen focuses on the philosophical aspects of these authors' doctrines, and views them from the standpoint of the cogency or weakness of their philosophical argumentation.

Tollefsen is interested in the notion of participation resulting from the idea that any entity *other* than God cannot exist through the mediation of some inherent power, but depends entirely on God. According to Tollefsen, this total dependence of created beings on God is expressed in the Patristic thought by the notion of participation. This notion also relates to divine activity vis-à-vis what God is not (p.210). Tollefsen seems justified in using a broad concept of *activity* rather than a narrower concept of *energy* (which he might also have used) because the Fathers sometimes talk about the participation of created beings in God in terms of participation not only in divine *energies*, but also in the divine nature.

In the first chapter, *Activity and Participation in Non-Christian Thought*, Tollefsen dwells on Plato's doctrine of ideas, on Aristotle's distinction between potency and energy, and particularly on Plotinus's doctrine of double activity of the One. Tollefsen examines Plotinus's teachings concerning the origination of all beings from the One, showing that the condition for all levels of beings to exist is the inner activity of the One, even though all beings originate directly from the *outer* activity of the One. In Plotinus, the One exercises no *care* about these beings, in the sense used in Christian philosophy.

In the chapter *St Basil and Anomean Theology*, Tollefsen introduces the doctrines of Eunomius and the Cappadocian Fathers, and of Basil of Caesarea in particular. He turns to the content of Basil's *Letter* 234, which discussed the question asked by his Anomean opponents: "What do you worship: what you know or what you do not know?". Basil's answer implied a

distinction between God's substance, which is inaccessible to us (πρὸς ἡμᾶς), and His descending and knowable energies, in contrast with his opponents' doctrine of knowing God according to His substance. Tollefsen argues that the term πρὸς ἡμᾶς has a Neoplatonic background. Contrary to the widely-held opinion that it was Eunomius who showed Neoplatonic leanings, Tollefsen argues that Basil's position came closer to Neoplatonism (pp.37-39).

Focusing on Anomean teaching on the knowability of divine substance and on Socrates Scholasticus's testimony, according to which Eunomius claimed to know God in the same way as God knows Himself, Tollefsen concludes that the followers of Anomean theology conceived God as an object of knowledge, while their opponents, John Chrysostom and the Cappadocian Fathers, saw God as an unknowable mystery inspiring awe and fear (pp.38-39). We might add that the Anomeans' claim that they knew God according to His substance does not necessarily mean that they believed they knew God as He is in reality (L. Wickham rightly emphasized this point in his "The Syntagmation of Aetius the Anomean", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 1968, 19, pp.565-66; and the problem is also discussed in M. Wiles, "Eunomius: Hair-Splitting Dialectician or Defender of the Accessibility of Salvation?", in *The Making of Orthodoxy. Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. by R. Williams, Cambridge, 2002, pp.157-72), so Tollefsen's argument is not, to my mind, entirely justified.

In the chapter *The Internal Activity of the Godhead*, Tollefsen explores the doctrines of Gregory of Nyssa (particularly as expressed in his dispute against Eunomius), Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor, concerning the inner life of the Holy Trinity. Tollefsen disagrees with the Christian and pagan understanding of the inner and outer activities of the divinity. He argues that Plotinus believed that the effect was always ontologically inferior to the cause, whereas Gregory of Nyssa could see the effect as having the same ontological status as the cause, and this approach had its impact on Gregory's Trinitarian doctrine. Tollefsen describes Gregory's Trinitarian teaching from the *Ad Ablabium* and *Ad Graecos* as a version of philosophical realism (p.51). He discusses the above-mentioned authors' Trinitarian doctrine in detail, in connection with the concepts of generation, energy, consubstantiality, willing, causality, union and distinction (in the case of Dionysius), and

so on.

The largest chapter, *The External Activity of the Godhead: Cosmology*, begins with a summary of the doctrine of creation and participation of Gregory of Nyssa. Tollefsen distinguishes between the internal and external activities in Gregory's teaching. The will of God the Father is the cause of internal activity, which defines the inner life of the Holy Trinity, conceived as movement of the hypostases towards one another. The will of God is the cause of external activity as well, which is responsible for the act of creation (pp.83-84). Tollefsen touches on the relationship between divine will, power, and ideas, according to which God created the world (pp.94-95), comparing the divine ideas/thoughts in Gregory's teaching with the second meaning of *activity* in Aristotle (96ff.). Tollefsen then moves on to the topic of participation in Gregory and discusses the latter's claim that divine nature is in all beings (97ff.). Here Tollefsen defines participation as the presence of divine energies that endow created beings with specific perfections (p.99). In his analysis, Tollefsen does not consider the participation of intellectual beings in the divine nature, a concept that can be found instead in Gregory (*Contra Eunomium*, 1.1.274.2-275.1, ed. Jaeger), who remained true in this respect to a long-standing Patristic tradition.

Moving on to Dionysius the Areopagite, Tollefsen insists on the difference between the Dionysian position and the traditional Patristic doctrine. According to Tollefsen, Dionysius did not develop the doctrine that divine will brings created beings into existence, he argued that created beings emerge automatically from divine existence (103ff.). Tollefsen thus defines the Dionysian doctrine of creation as emanationism, in opposition to creationism (pp.107-108).

In the section on Maximus the Confessor, Tollefsen dwells on some biographical details of Maximus's life, referring to his earlier book on this topic. He takes for granted that Maximus came from Constantinople (though this is disputed in the literature, e.g. J. M. Garrigues, "La Personne composée du Christ d'après Saint Maxime le Confesseur", *Revue Thomiste*, 1974, 74, pp.184-185; Ch. Boudignon, "Maxime était-il constantinopolitain?" in *Philomathestatos, Etudes patristiques et byzantines offertes a Jacques Noret a l'occasion de ses soixante cinq ans*, éd. par B. Janssens, B. Roosen, P. Van Deun, Peeters, 2004, pp. 1-43; A. Levy, *Le créé et l'incréé: Maxime le*

Confesseur et Thomas d'Aquin. Aux sources de la querelle palamienne, Vrin, 2006, p.487), and he suggests that it is there that Maximus may have attended lectures or read books by Stephen of Alexandria, who came from the Alexandrian Academy and may have recounted some of the arguments advanced by John Philoponus against the cosmological doctrine of Proclus. Stephen may have also given Maximus works by other members of the Alexandrian Academy, including the writings of John Philoponus. Tollefsen argues that the influence of those books could explain some of the traits of Maximus's cosmology, which are similar in some respects to the concepts found in Philoponus's *Contra Proclum* (p.119).

The chapter entitled *The External Activity of the Godhead: Incarnation* discusses the doctrine of incarnation in Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, focusing on divine activity in the human nature of the God-man (revealed in the concept of *communicatio idiomatum*), and on the concept of participation. Tollefsen concentrates on the relationship between nature and energies in Maximus the Confessor's teaching on incarnation and deification.

Finally, in the chapter dedicated to Gregory Palamas, Tollefsen discusses whether the Gregory Palamas's writings manifest the philosophical traditions surfacing in Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor (p.185). Tollefsen makes the point that, unlike Maximus, Palamas appears to make no distinction between the concepts of *logos* and *energy* (pp.191-199). In Palamas, operations have the same role as *logoi* in Maximus, and paradigms in Dionysius: they bring beings into existence, preserve them, and constitute their substantial characteristics. Tollefsen also discusses two topics relevant to Gregory Palamas: the problem of the relationship between divine substance and energies, and the problem of unions and distinctions in divine energies.

Tollefsen disagrees with Meyendorff's claim that there is a real distinction between divine substance and energies in Gregory Palamas (pp.193;198;214). He distinguishes between the natural participation of created beings in divine energies and the individual participation dependent on choice of intellectual beings. Tollefsen sees the former type of participation as corresponding to naming God "the Being of all beings", and the latter to naming God "the Wisdom of all wise" (p.199). Generally speaking, Tollefsen bases his analysis in this chapter

of the book on only two of Palamas's works, the *Triads* and the *Capita 150*. That is why, in talking about the natural and individual participation of created beings in divine energies, he fails to consider the passages in Palamas's writings on the natural participation of various kinds of created beings, and on the individual participation of intellectual beings in God (*De divina unione et distinctione* 16; *Dialogus inter orthodoxum et Barlaamitam* 46-47; *De divina et deifica participatione* 11; *Antirrhethici contra Acindynum* 27). So Tollefsen's discussion of this topic in Gregory Palamas is by no means exhaustive. On the whole, Tollefsen's book is nonetheless a valuable and important study.