

Modern Day Nameworshipping Heresy Wrongly Attacks Russian Synod of 1913



Icon of the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church

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Why the Russian Synod of 1913 was not Heretical

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The contemporary revivers of the heresy of Nameworshipping have won great notoriety for themselves by rejecting the holy council of Constantinople held in 1913 and the holy Russian

council of the same year. The main reason the heretics reject these councils is that the councils condemn the idea that the name of God is an energy of God, which is the central tenet of the heresy of Nameworshipping. However, the Nameworshippers (who euphemistically call themselves “Nameglorifiers”) also consider the Russian council of 1913 to be heretical since it stated a distinction between the words “God” and “divinity.” Specifically, in their letter of August 29, 2012 to the Orthodox clergy of the Cathedral of St. Mark in Boston, MA, the Nameworshipping bishops denounce four phrases in the 1913 decision of the Russian Synod, alleging that they are novel and unorthodox because they distinguish between God and divinity. The Nameworshippers consider these terms to be absolutely synonymous and that any distinction between the two constitutes a heresy.

This insistence on the part of the Nameworshippers that the words “God” and “divinity” are completely identical is ridiculous in the extreme, as anyone who has access to a dictionary should easily understand. In fact, almost no two words are exact synonyms. Words have a variety of different meanings and may be close synonyms in one sense but not in another. Using them, we sift out all the possible meanings to find the one that seems to fit best the context we have in mind. In accordance with this general principle, we find that the Holy Fathers themselves employ words in various senses. Only in restricted circumstances (usually polemics or formal doctrinal definitions) do they confine a word to a single, technical meaning.

If we review how the Fathers use the word “God,” we find that it is most commonly employed to denote the divine essence or one or all of the divine hypostases, and less frequently the divine energies. As for the word “divinity,” this is most commonly used to denote the divine essence, less frequently a single hypostasis, and still less frequently the divine energies. Collectively, the energies of God are called in most cases simply “energies” or “divine energies.” Individually, they are called by their various distinctive titles: foreknowledge, creative power, and so forth. The usage we characterize here as “typical” prevails particularly with respect to the first two points, especially among the earlier Fathers of the Church, the Fathers with whom the Russian members of the 1913 council were most familiar.¹

When we turn to the works of St. Gregory Palamas, a somewhat different terminological balance is evident, a result of theological developments of his day. Saint Gregory employs the term “divinity” for the divine energies with some frequency. Very rarely, he even uses the term “God” for the same.

Because of the relative frequency of St. Gregory’s use of the word “divinity” for the divine energies, the Russian Council Fathers were well aware of it. Seeking to follow St. Gregory in all things, they themselves made use of this terminology, even while noting that he “employs the word ‘divinity’ in a somewhat broader sense than is common” – that is, than those Fathers with whom the Russians were familiar. The Russian Fathers do not, however, use the word “God” for the divine energies, and even

assert that St. Gregory “nowhere call the energies God, but teaches to call them divinity.” This statement is the basis for the Nameworshippers’ first charge against the holy Council, which they condemn for theological deviation in this matter. The charge is blatantly intended to discredit the council’s entire work. But in reality, there is no theological deviation here – we have already seen the Russians’ eagerness to use St. Gregory’s term “divinity” for the divine energies. There is only an historical error. And the explanation for it is a very simple, mundane one. Prior to the Russian Revolution, not all of St. Gregory Palamas’ writings had been translated into Russian. Hence the Council Fathers were unaware that St. Gregory occasionally did use the word “God” for the divine energies. Nevertheless, there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that if the Russian Fathers had been familiar with this rare usage, they would have rejected it. By their willingness to employ the term “divinity” for the divine energies, the Council fathers clearly demonstrated both their fidelity to St. Gregory’s thought and their belief that the energies were in fact divine in the full sense of the word. “Divinity,” in the Fathers the Russians knew best, means this, precisely.

The Russians’ mistake is obviously one which any honest and good-willed person should be able to understand. That the Nameworshippers should attempt to exploit it is disingenuous: misleading, fraudulent, and shameless; a cover for their own perverse teaching.

In their first charge against the Russian Council, the

Idolaters pretend that any distinction between the words “divinity” and “God” turns the Divinity into a creature. Yet from what has been said, it is obvious that this assertion is irrelevant with respect to the Russian Council of 1913, since the Council Fathers’ preference for the term “divinity” in respect to God’s energies is to be explained solely by historical circumstance (i.e., the unavailability of certain of St. Gregory’s writings) and fidelity to what the Russian Fathers did know of St. Gregory’s vocabulary, rather than by any theological deviation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that St. Gregory Palamas not only uses the term “divinity” for the divine energies far more frequently than the term “God”: he at times explicitly and specifically contrasts “essence” and “energies” by equating the first with “God” and the second with “divinity.” For example, in Pro Hesychastis 3.2.10, he writes:

“With common voice all the Holy Fathers teach that it is impossible to discover a name that manifests the divine nature; rather, the names manifest the energies. For even the term “divinity” manifests the energies, denoting ‘to view,’ ‘to be seen,’ ‘to flash,’ or ‘to self-deify.’ But the essence of God which is beyond all names transcends this energy, inasmuch as to act thus belongs to that which is activated and being beyond name belongs to that which is named in this manner. This does not hinder us from adoring one God and one divinity, in the same way that the fact that we call a ray of light ‘sun’ does not prevent

us from thinking of one sun and one light.”

Here the saint is comparing God’s essence to the sun and energy to its light. Even while implying that “God” may refer in some cases to energy, he uses “God” to refer to the essence and “divinity” to refer to the energies. Again, in 2.3.8 of the same work he writes, “The monks know that the essence of God transcends the fact of being inaccessible to the senses, since God is not only above all created things, but even beyond divinity...” Here, St. Gregory again refers to the essence as “God,” while referring to the energies as “divinity.” Since St. Gregory himself makes the distinction and applies the words to the realities in this way, the Nameworshippers should be more than willing to allow the Russian Fathers this distinction and terminology. They should desist from pretending that to make a distinction between “God” and “divinity” reduces the divine energies to a creature, and admit that their criticism is altogether baseless.

To summarize the above: the several realities in God (essence, hypostasis, and energy) are described both in common speech and Patristic vocabulary by various terms, sometimes interchangeable, sometimes overlapping, sometimes employed in one manner, sometimes in another, depending upon need and context. The honest and devout person considers the sense of a word’s use, and allows the word to express the distinctions

indicated by the user, rather than to posit artificial and false contradictions. Especially, he does not, on the basis of such sophistry, condemn the holy councils of the Church of Christ – councils accepted by the entire Orthodox Church for over a hundred years. To persist in this condemnation is expressive only of theological ignorance and arrogance and a mania to propagate heresy.

Next the Nameworshippers move on to another phrase in the Synodal Decision, in which the Russian Fathers of 1913 state that we cannot say that Christ revealed “His God” on Tabor but must say that He revealed “His divinity.” The truth of this statement ought to be obvious to any Orthodox Christian. Moreover, any schoolboy would be able to correct the Nameworshippers’ lack of knowledge of basic grammar, in that the genitive personal pronoun “his” is normatively understood as a genitive of possession. When modifying “divinity,” we correctly understand “his” to refer to Christ revealing an Attribute-Energy which He possesses. When modifying “God,” “his” denotes a relationship of inferior to superior, of Christ revealing His own God, some God superior to Him. This is subordinationism or adoptionism, both of which are heresies. Since the phrase “His God” entails heresy while “His divinity” does not, there is a very significant difference between the two. Hence the distinction the Russian Fathers make is valid and most Orthodox.

Finally, the Russian Fathers state that the word “God” indicates personhood, while “divinity” indicates attribute, quality, or

nature. The Nameworshippers object to this Orthodox statement and claim that it introduces an inadmissible concept of personality in God, which allegedly would contradict the Orthodox understanding of one God in Three Persons. In fact, however, the Russian Fathers are correct and the Nameworshippers are wrong. This is due to the nature of the word “divinity,” which is an *abstract* noun formed from the word “God.” Rather than emphasize the personal nature of God, it emphasizes His qualities, which may be considered in the abstract. We use masculine *personal* pronouns to refer to God, but we do not use them to refer to divinity or to any of the energies of God; i.e., we refer to God as “He,” but we call God’s will (considered in and of itself) not “He” but “it.” Again, it is important to remember that the term “God” can be used to refer to each of the Divine Hypostases individually as well as to the Trinity as a whole. The Russian Fathers were not at all constructing a new concept of a “personality of God,” but were simply pointing out that God is in fact personal in nature; i.e., that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are the One God.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Russian Fathers of 1913 were not guilty of espousing Barlaamism or any other Latin heresy, but rather were zealous to expose and correct the pernicious heresy, Nameworshipping, which confronted them. While they did make an historical mistake in reference to the writings of St. Gregory Palamas, they did so out of ignorance and not out of a desire to contradict the saint, whose work they were zealous to uphold and establish. The Russian Fathers were true successors to St. Gregory and the hesychasts (whom they highly laud), and

they point out that it is the Nameworshippers who are actually the Barlaamites, because they confuse the created with the uncreated, that is, a created name with the divine energies. Ultimately, it is on the basis of one questionable explanatory passage that the modern Nameworshippers reject the whole decision of the Russian Church. So intent are they on demonizing the holy council that they completely deny the distinction made by St. Gregory Palamas himself between “God” and “divinity.” Thus, it becomes evident that the modern Nameworshippers have read St. Gregory less, and with far less understanding, than did the Russians one hundred years ago. Moreover, it is clear that the Nameworshippers reject not simply a single mistaken passage, but rather the entire force and intent of the council. For if they rejected only the one mistake but accepted the decisions and declarations, they would be able to clear themselves of the charge of heresy by saying, “We accept the Russian Council of 1913 against the blasphemous Nameworshippers, but point out that St. Gregory Palamas did in fact call the divine energies God Himself.” Then there would be no problem. But the Nameworshipping bishops obstinately refuse to make such a statement. Why? Because they themselves are indeed Nameworshippers and support Bulatovich and the deluded monks of Mount Athos, against whom the council was directed! Manifestly, their objections to the Russian Council of 1913 are based on their own adherence to heresy. The mistake made by the Russian Council of 1913 is nothing more than a convenient excuse to avoid accepting its condemnation of the very real heresy which they themselves espouse.

May we the Orthodox avoid espousing any heresy, especially the pantheistic nightmare of the Nameworshippers, but rather follow piously in the footsteps of St. Gregory Palamas and the Russian Fathers who condemned and banned from the Church every blasphemy against the sweet name of our Savior Christ!

1 See, for example, 1.12 in St. John of Damascus's *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, a work that was very popular in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Source: <http://nftu.net/editorial-russian-synod-1913-heretical>