

The Trinity from Six Groups: a Logical Explication of Byzantine Triadology by Joseph Bryennios

Introduction

Joseph Bryennios was a Palamite theologian, one among the many. Nevertheless, his theological legacy could be of a peculiar interest, at least, in two respects. The first one is methodological, and the second one is purely logical.

Methodologically, it is interesting to see how the Byzantine theology, in the person of Bryennios, was dealing with a new problem that has had no ready answer. From a logical point of view, Bryennios elaborated the most detailed explication of Byzantine triadology, which has never been studied, even though Dumitru Stăniloae has noticed Bryennios's contribution as early as in 1970.

Bryennios has composed his most important theological works when he was about seventy, after a long career of a hieromonk, the leader of the Church of Crete, and, finally, a court theologian in Constantinople. His *opus magnum* is formed with 21 theological homilies delivered in different places before the high officials of the Church and the State in 1421 and 1422 and the *Hortatory Sermon on the Unity of the Churches*, 1422, which look together as a teaching course composed from 22 lectures.

The “teaching course” is polemical but to the minimal extent. It would be certainly useful to assess Bryennios's knowledge of Augustine and Thomas of Aquino, whom he quoted in Greek translations. Augustine is for him a “saint” being one of the Holy Fathers proclaimed by the Fifth Ecumenical Council. 17 years later, in Florence, Marc of Ephesus will reject a testimony from Augustine as a non-authoritative author and not a saint. The Latins, in turn, will show to Marc the quotation from the Acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council—the same one that is now referred to by Bryennios—but Marc will answer that there is no such text in Greek and it seems to be a falsification. Bryennios, of course, managed to read Augustine *ad maiorem gloriam Orthodoxiae*. Bryennios referred to the Fifth Ecumenical Council with no shadow of suspicion, which would have been hardly possible were he considering this fragment from its Acts as going from Latin sources. The early modern and the present day scholars, however, do not know this fragment outside its quotation in the Acts of the Council of Florence. This is a little puzzle posed by Bryennios to our modern scholarship, which I mention here *en passant*.

The main feature of Bryennios's “teaching course” of triadology is its fundamentality. Far from being limited to the *Filioque*, it explores the very notions of divine hypostases and their mutual relations.

The Problem of Order between the Hypostases

Indeed, the bulk of the course could be labelled simply “a Palamite triadology”. We will meet there all the points that became standard in the Palamite reception of the triadology by Gregory of Cyprus and his 1285 Blachernae Synod (quoted by Bryennios explicitly). Among these claims, there is, of course, that about non-existence of the order between the hypostases of the Holy Trinity. The familiar order of enumeration of the hypostases—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—belongs to their mode of revelation and our understanding but not to the divine nature. All these topics became almost forgotten after the fourth- and fifth-century discussions but found a second breath

after the *Filioque* doctrine of the Council of Lyon (1274) *tanquam ab uno principio*: in this context, the Latins insisted that the Son is “the second” in the Trinity and, therefore, the necessary middle between “the first” (the Father) and “the third” (the Holy Spirit). It became impossible to deny the *Filioque* without denying the very possibility of introducing the ordinal numerals into the Holy Trinity.

This topic is dealt with by Bryennios at length, providing a rich florilegium of patristic testimonies, far beyond the “quotation number one” from Pseudo-Chrysostomus (Severian of Gabala) that the divine nature has no order but not because it is “disordered” but because it is beyond any order.

Two peculiarities of Bryennios’s approach are especially worth noting.

When referring to the famous passage from Gregory of Nazianzus about the movement of the monad that overcomes the dyad and stops at the triad, he adds that Gregory did not say “the first goes to the second and reaches the third” but said “one”, “two”, and “three”—thus precluding any idea of ordinal numbers. He proceeds further to explain that any of the hypostases could be taken as “the first”, and the two remaining hypostases would become this “dyad”.

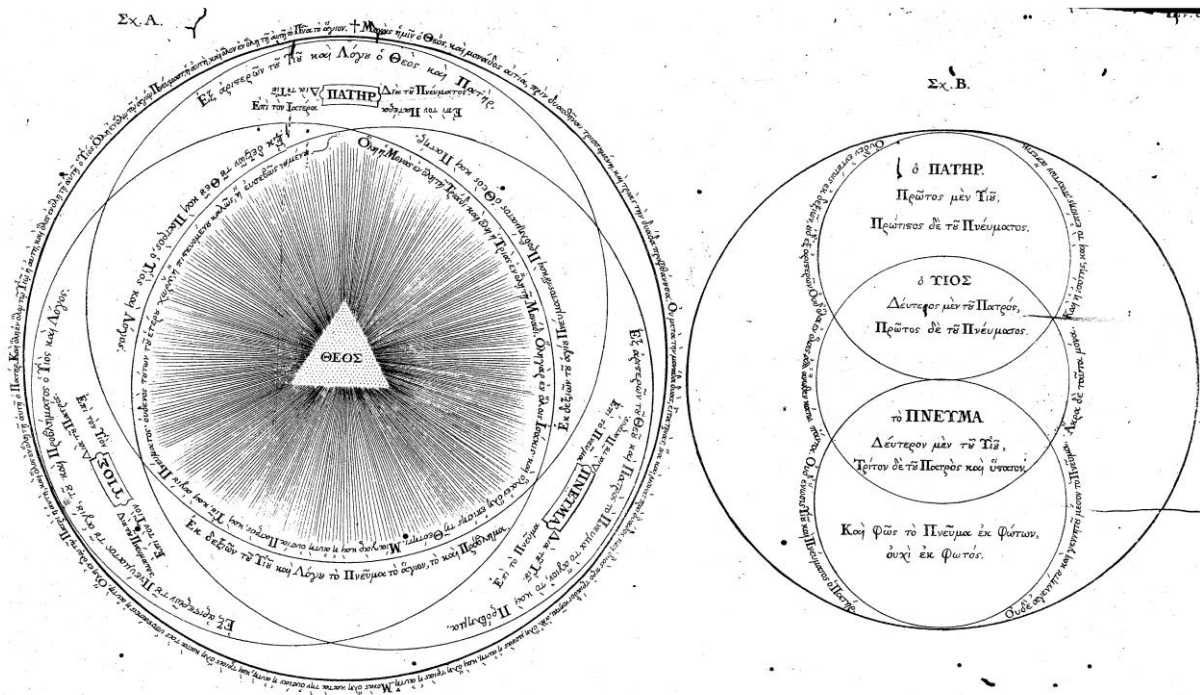
The exegesis of this passage of Gregory of Nazianzus has had a very long tradition. The most of the late Byzantine authors were following Maximus the Confessor who argued that this “movement of the monad” takes place in our mind only. Indeed, an application of this scheme to the three hypostases of the Trinity would be favourable to the Latin view. It is rather symptomatic that among the late Byzantine theologians who considered this movement as taking place within the Holy Trinity was George Akropolites, who will later undersign, in the emperor’s name, the union of Lyon.

It is hardly probable that Maximus the Confessor’s understanding of “the movement of the monad” was an adequate reading of Gregory of Nazianzus. In both cases when Gregory says about this monad, Gregory is never referring to the processes of our understanding of God; his context is “theological” in the Byzantine sense of the word, where it was the term equivalent to our modern “triadology”.

To be able to revisit the authentic meaning of the idea by Gregory, a late Byzantine theologian, if he was without a “latinophonic” agenda, would have had to go further, as only Joseph Bryennios did.

This step is connected with the second peculiarity of Bryennios’s method of theological explanation, his graphical charts. Such charts were not unusual in the Byzantine theological manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages but they are often omitted in the modern editions.

Bryennios compares, with two graphic charts, the Latin subordinationism, where the Father, the Son, and the Spirit form a consequence downward, towards the humanity, and the Orthodox chart drawn by himself. He was not original in designing the hypostases with the three circles, but his original idea was to dispose the centres of the circles in the vertices of an equilateral triangle, thus expressing a perfect symmetry between the three.



According to Bryennios, there is, in the Trinity, no order in the one sense—that of the usual meaning of the word “order”—but there is some order in a higher sense. And Bryennios attempted to explain it.

The Byzantine Fear of Symmetry

The novelty of Bryennios’s approach will become more understandable against some historical background. The Palamite “energetical” understanding of δι’ υἱοῦ (“through the Son”) goes back to Gregory of Cyprus and, through him, to Nicephore Blemmydes. The original meaning of the Blemmydian “through the Son” remains an object of scholarly discussions, but, at least, “the Blemmydes of the Palamite tradition” is the Blemmydes we seem to know.

In one of Blemmydes’s most influential works, we read: “...if the Logos and the Spirit are from the Father as from the principle/beginning and not as one of the two is through another (μη διὰ θατέρου θάτερον), a division would be introduced into the divinity”. This formula could be understood in either of two ways, symmetrical or not. Read in a symmetrical way, this formula would mean that in the same sense as we can say that the Spirit is “through the Son”, we can say also that the Son is “through the Spirit”. This theory, in the twentieth-century theology, is labelled *Spirituque*, whereas it is not an exact opposition to the *Filioque* (the exact opposition to the *Filioque* is one of the Ethiopian theologies known since the 16th cent., the so-called *Qabat* “unction”, sc., the unction of the Spirit from whom the Son is begotten within the Trinity). Read in an asymmetrical way, the Blemmydian formula would mean simply a reference to the Spiritus’s proceeding “through the Son”. Michel Stavrou has recently published another but quite contemporaneous Blemmydian theological text showing that only the asymmetrical reading was the genuine. There, in a series of syllogisms against the *Filioque*, Blemmydes wrote: “If the Holy Spirit is not through the Son, the Son will be through the Spirit, but this is not so. Therefore, the opposite (takes place)”. – We see in what extent Blemmydes was confirmed that the Trinity is asymmetric and it would be impossible to consider the begetting of the Son through the Spirit.

An explicit negation of the *Spirituque* in the above sense is, however, rare in the Byzantine theology. I think that the Blemmydes's case is exceptional. However, the normal case was a silence. For instance, when reading Gregory Palamas's treatises against the *Filioque*, we can wait from line to line for the proposal to accept the formula "though the Son" in the same sense as "through the Spirit" applied to the Son himself—but nothing occurs.

Bryennios bravely put his foot on the *terra incognita*. Nevertheless, "bravely", in the Bryennios's case, does not mean "unpreparedly". He will provide his own explanation of the mutual relations between the hypostases only within his own explanation of the unity of the Holy Trinity.

The Unity of the Trinity

Bryennios repeats the question that I would consider to be, since the fifth century, the major logical health test for the Byzantine theological doctrines. What I call the "logical health" is not the same as "*theological health*", because logically unhealthy doctrines could be theologically impeccable, but one could call "logical health" such condition of a doctrine when its logical forms are fitting with the meaning that is ascribed to them. This Bryennios's question is the following: if both statements are true, namely, that (1) the three hypostases of the Trinity and any three men are united as having the respective common natures, but (2) the unity of the Trinity has evidently something more, then, what is the difference? – This question appeared in this form in the middle of the sixth century, when John Philoponus "deconstructed" the Cappadocian notion ὁμοούσιος after having reduced it to the unity of nature in the ordinary sense. Since then, it became impossible not to add something to this term applied to the Trinity, unless one did not share the Philoponian Trinitarian doctrine of the so-called "Tritheism".

As a standard Byzantine answer to this Philoponian manoeuvre the new avatar of the older term περιχώρησις appeared in the seventh century and continued to be in use up to Gregory Palamas. This term first appeared somewhere in the fifth century when its meaning was the "mechanism" of the unity between two different natures through the περιχώρησις of their energies. Since the seventh century, it became applied to the unity of the hypostases of the Trinity. However, the problem was that there were no different energies of the divine hypostases. Thus, the meaning of this term used in the Trinitarian sense was opaque. In the triadology, unlike the Christology, it was used as a token and not as an explanation.

Bryennios does never use the term περιχώρησις in his *opus magnum*. Instead, he goes deeper into the mutual connexions of the notions of hypostasis and energy.

Following Dionysius the Areopagite, Bryennios applied the term "energy" in the same way as the Dionysian term πρόοδος, that is, to the begetting of the Son by the Father and to the proceeding of the Holy Spirit—as well as to divine energies *ad extra*. Formally, this looks as ascribing of different energies to different hypostases, but Bryennios does not mean anything more than the difference of the hypostatic *idiomata*. Bryennios follows the tradition—reopened by Blemmydes but inaugurated by Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century—of approaching the notion of hypostasis not from the notion of essence/nature but from the equivalent notion of the natural energy (one of the classical definitions of the notion of energy ascribed by the *Doctrina Patrum* to Gregory of Nyssa is "the movement of the essence"). Thus, if we can say, in some sense, that the hypostasis is the essence (but with the hypostatic *idiomata*), we can equally say that the hypostasis is the energy—with the same *idiomata*. Therefore, the unity of the divine energy is not compromised.

Thus, Bryennios turned out to be in position to explain what his predecessors have hid under the opaque label of περιχώρησις. Indeed, said Bryennios, three men are united with their common nature, but when someone of them is doing something, nobody of the two others has any

need to do the same. Such a situation is impossible within the Trinity. Thus, if the Father begets the Son, both Son and Spirit participate. And if the Spirit proceeds from the Father, not only the Father but also the Son participates. We can consider this triangle from any corner. For instance, if we take the Spirit to be the first, we have to say that the Spirit proceeds, but both Father and Son participate—each of them in his own way—in the proceeding of the Spirit.

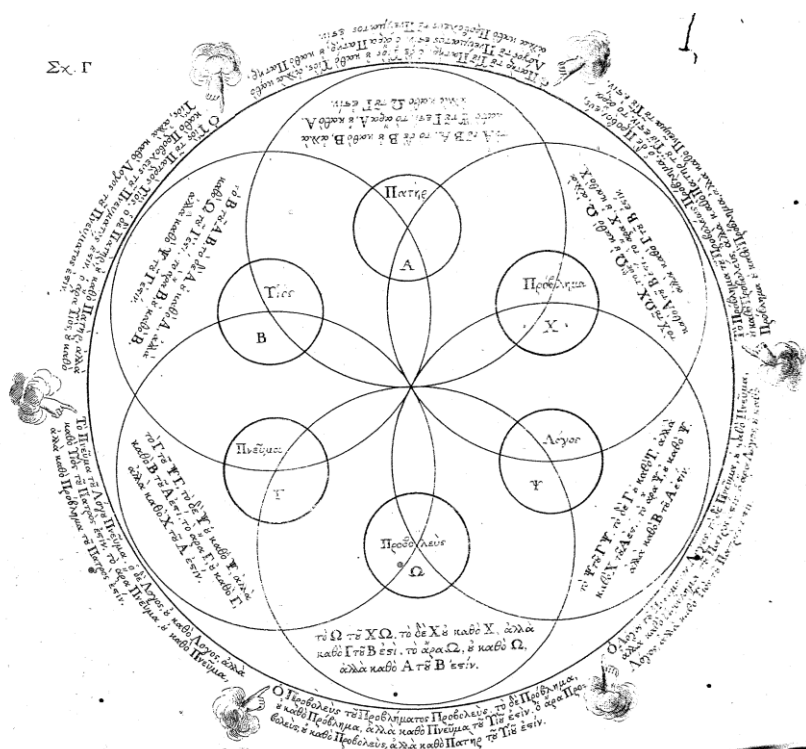
The only asymmetry is, of course, the *μοναρχία* of the Father that means that the Father only is the cause of both Son and Spirit. According to another explanation by Bryennios, the mode of action of the Father is active, whereas the mode of action of the two remaining hypostases is passive, because they undergo their own begetting or proceeding.

The Formulation of the *Spirituque*

As we have just seen, Bryennios distinguishes between the causal and non-causal relations between the divine hypostases. The causal ones are only those with the Father, whereas those between the Son and the Spirit are non-causal. The Son does participate in the proceeding of the Holy Spirit but without becoming its cause. But the same is true for Spirit's participation in the begetting of the Son! – Thus, Bryennios is a proponent of the *Spirituque* in the modern sense, where it is a symmetric doctrine (and not an asymmetric begetting of the Son through the Spirit, as it is in the Ethiopian doctrine of *Qəbat*).

There are, however, fundamental difference between this *Spirituque* by Bryennios and, at least, some modern *Spirituque* triadologies. Bryennios, unlike some of the latter, distinguish between the casual and non-casual reciprocity between the Son and the Spirit. Thus, his thoughts were far from adding to the Latin causal *Filioque* an equally causal *Spirituque*.

For making his idea absolutely clear, Bryennios provided the third graphic chart and accompanied it with a very long but recursive explanation. It would be sufficient to quote it only in a part: “The Son, because he is the one who is the Son, alone possesses the name of Son *vis-à-vis* the Father, for he is the Son of the Father only, not of two; but the name of Logos which belongs to the Son alone within the Holy Trinity has reference not only to the Father as the one who is Intellect, but also to the Spirit in another way...” And, in the same manner, the Spirit is He Who Proceeds only *vis-à-vis* the Father who caused him to proceed, whereas being the Spirit of both Father and Son.



So far, so good. Only if we look at the chart 3, we will notice that the number of the circles became six, and this is somewhat counter-intuitive, because, for the unique Trinity, three would be expected to be enough. This fact alone reveals that something happened to the logics.—Not in Bryennios's brain but in the theological tradition he followed and made explicit.

A Logical Analysis

Let us return to the beginning of our survey, to Bryennios's interpretation of the “movement of the monad”—which does not pass through the first, the second, and the third for reaching the triad. It is easy to understand what is here logically difficult: let us try to count to three without any “second” element. Evagrius wrote about the “three” in the Holy Trinity that this “three” has no “two” before it and no “four” after it.” Bryennios did not know this text by Evagrius but the meaning of his explanation is the same.

Indeed, this problem must be discussed in purely mathematical and set-theoretical terms, which I did elsewhere. Here only a summary of this discussion. The familiar and consistent notion of number is related to the notion of pair, and especially the notion of ordered pair. These numbers imply that we are authorised to perform two procedures: (1) to select the pairs of some elements, and (2) to make these pairs ordered, that is, to select which element there is the first and which is the second. Thus, the ordinals logically precede to the cardinals: the first, the second, and the third are necessary for producing the one, the two, and the three.

In the Holy Trinity, we are not authorised to select the pairs at all. – This is the fundamental feature of the Byzantine theological tradition distinctive from all other, Latin and Oriental, triadologies, as well as from the nominally Orthodox “school theology” influenced by the Latins.

Nevertheless, to become able to speak about this “three without two”, this theological tradition usually takes recourse to the Correspondence Principle, as it can be named according to the analogous principle of the Quantum mechanics by Niels Bohr. This Byzantine principle allows using the classical concepts (taken from secular logical traditions) but approves for them some non-classical operations. The art of counting to three without passing two is based on a such operation. I have named it the forming of pseudo-ordered pairs.

In the ordered pair, each element is unique. In the pseudo-ordered pairs, each element is unique, too, but there is an unlimited number of alternative variants for each of these elements, and—what is the paraconsistent condition—all these mutually excluding alternatives are realised simultaneously.

In our triadological concepts, there are two elements which become “the second one” simultaneously. Moreover, the first element of the pseudo-ordered pairs, which is also unique, is simultaneously one of the three. It is important to realise that we are dealing with three and two “unique” elements instead of a composition of three plus two. The pair continues to be the pair, a composition of two unique elements. “Unique” means that this unique element is either A or B but not both. Nevertheless, both A and B are this unique elements, whereas A is not identical to B. This is a contradiction based on the contrary opposition: $A = X$ and $B = X$ but $A \neq B$.

This logic tolerates contradictions and is therefore called paraconsistent. Such logics are studied with a great success since the 1970s. One of the field of their application is Quantum logic, where the formal problems are very similar to our theological ones.

On the chart 3, Bryennios showed the paraconsistent pairs, whose total number for the Trinity is 6 (=number of permutations (ordered combinations) of two elements from three).

Each second element of the paraconsistent pair has its “counter-pair”. Bryennios showed these “counter-pairs” as second elements labelled with the final letters of the alphabet (X, Ψ, Ω) and called Προβολεύς, Λόγος, and Πρόβλημα. Each of the six circles signifies the first element of the six possible ordered—in fact, pseudo-ordered—pairs.