The Absolute Discourse of Theology

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Abstract

This article first defines the absolute discourse, then discusses its possibility in theology, as well as the relationships between language, thought, and reality as they derive from the spirituality and life of the Eastern Church. Theology must face several problems—including the paradox of transcendence, the violence of metaphysics, onto-theology, and the duplicity of language itself—, but the Revelation of the Absolute itself legitimizes the theological discourse. By using both affirmations and negations, theology reveals an iconic structure of discourse that opens itself towards life and spirituality. The conclusion is that, in the absolute discourse of theology, words, even ineffable ones, are insufficient without life.

Keywords: Eastern Orthodox Theology, Religious Experience, Spiritual Life, Diacritical Language, Christian Dogmas, Apophaticism

The Absolute Discourse

There is a discourse on the absolute that is not religious. It first says something about us and about our enigmatic inclination to speak in absolute terms, before dealing with boundary-related issues, such as transcendence and the abyss, everything and nothing, death and love, and so on. When we attribute them a value that resembles the religious pathos, these issues—along with other, more mundane ones—can take the place of the sacred and even the place of God, according to Mircea Eliade's idea that contemporary man camouflages the sacred in profane attitudes.[1]

When the discourse on the absolute becomes religious, however, it uses a different logic. In the tradition of the Church—and we will continue to deal with that of the Eastern Christian Church in particular—, it must

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[1] "But the modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals." Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: A Harvest Book, 1963), 204–05.

express the difference between creation and the uncreated God, as well as the possibility of man's deification. By using words with mundane referents to express the ineffable, this discourse resorts to various types of displacement (stylistic, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, etc.) in an attempt to say something meaningful about the inexpressible. Words try to convey more than an additional excess of the same order as that of non-absolute referents and meanings; they are uttered around a *meta-* or a *supra-*, toward a beyond of a different order. So long as no dialectic can suppress what remains outside the horizon of linguistic expression and experience, the language used to convey this difference will be improper and insufficient. The poetry of the givenness of the absolute through words, no matter how successful, cannot close what does not truly reach the text, but only announces itself through it.

Let us call this discourse oriented towards an absent referent, towards an overcoming of limits, or towards God – *absolute discourse*. Let us also concede that, by using language, we bring these limits into the realm of linguistic visibility only as limits, without expressing that beyondness of mystery, whether it be a simple mystery of idolatry, capable of transforming language itself or the one who utters it into an absolute, or the impenetrable mystery of God. Finally, let us understand that what we cannot say through words can have a crucial relevance for the meaning of what we can say[2] and, at the same time, for our being and our becoming as humans.

The absolute discourse reveals several forms of mystery: the mystery of who we are ourselves (a mystery of our own unconscious sometimes), the mystery of the world we live in, and the mystery of God, which our world and our words cannot comprehend. In the latter case, the absolute discourse takes the form of *theology*: by using a language of mystery, theology speaks of me and refers to myself from the point of view of my destiny, all while speaking of God and of the world as His creation. An insufficient and kenotic language, uttered by myself and by God alike, this language of theology is a window onto the face of mystery, through which one can glance at what is outside the text and even outside of thought. Let us conclude that, by entering the revelatory movement of the Absolute, the absolute discourse of theology is not the Absolute Himself, but rather the icon that points to Him. We will talk about this very meaning of the utterance/writing of the absolute discourse in the following pages.

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[2] Wittgenstein realized the importance of the mysterious and of the inexpressible for the meaning of what we can say in words. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Însemnări postume 1914–1951 [Notebook 1914–1951]*, trans. Mircea Flonta and Adrian-Paul Iliescu (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2005), 44.

Four Issues

We begin by addressing certain issues that the absolute discourse raises. The first issue refers precisely to the paradox of transcendence, which applies to the transcendence of God as well: if knowledge can be expressed through language, how can one know and express transcendence without annihilating it through this very knowledge and without diminishing it through this very expression? In what words could one express "the wholly other"?[3] How can we describe "the good above all words"[4] by using words?

The second issue has to do with the violence of metaphysics. Nietzsche accused metaphysics of the will to power, whereas Marx pointed to the connection between metaphysics and political domination. Following in the footsteps of Heidegger, who proposed the destruction of metaphysics, postmodern philosophy seeks, with Derrida, to deconstruct metaphysics and, with Vattimo, to replace strong thought with a form of thought that is weak, relativistic, and subjectivistic. When applied to theology, the idea that the violence of metaphysics can also be seen in the violence of language turns into an even more serious accusation. Does religious discourse conceal any dominating intentions when it speaks about truth, freedom, and God?

A third issue, related to the previous one, is the onto-theological issue, which Martin Heidegger pointed out: do the concepts used by the language of metaphysics not enclose the divine in themselves, idolizing it by this very enclosure?[5] What can assure us that the names of God—such as "causa sui" or "being"—do not become conceptual gods, by which reason reduces God to a concept? How could the absolute discourse—be it metaphysical, philosophical, or religious—avoid this pitfall of identifying the living God with the great concepts of the metaphysical tradition? If onto-theology were to prove the existence of God only through the use of concepts, as defined by Kant and as described by Heidegger, then would experience, understood as a supra-conceptual experience, be a solution?

Because of its neutrality, language has the advantage of being able to convey very different ideas; however, in religious and ethical contexts, it has the disadvantage of expressing *any* position, be it theistic or atheistic, ethical or unethical. This versatility becomes problematic due to the subtle

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[3] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1924).

[4] Sf. Grigorie Palama, *Opere complete* [The Complete Works], vol. 3, trans. Cornel Coman et al. (București: Gândul Aprins, 2015), 1, 1 [1].

[5] The idea of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics can be found in Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 60 *sqq*.

ambiguity it proposes: used in propositions, words can express both truth and untruth. The question now is how to get out of this duplicity in a way that makes it possible to differentiate between truth and falsehood; between "sound words" (Tim 1:13), words of consolation (1 Thessalonians 4:18) on the one hand, and "empty words" (Eph 5: 6) or "plausible arguments" (Col 2: 4) on the other.

Why Words?

Revelation and Words

The words used in the absolute discourse are of an indisputable relevance. If we lose the absolute in an inaccessible transcendence, these linguistic signifiers are apparently all that is left to us. Naturally, the relationship between a radical transcendence and the words that try to express it is not the only possible figure. Thus, the pattern changes when transcendence is a personal God: God reveals Himself as He utters the words of the call.[6] In this second case, the importance of words is, once again, undeniable.

The Holy Scripture states that the words of God apply to both power and truth. Power is visible because God brings the entire seen and unseen reality from non-being to being; He creates everything by word alone. The Word of Christ also astonished people, because it "possessed authority" (Lk. 4:32) and had a power that lay in its divine origin and in the promise of defeating suffering and death, in the announced hope of gaining freedom and truth. Otherwise, if we break the connection between word and power, then power becomes more important, "For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20). (Note that this creative "power" of God's words is not the same as the historical "domination" of one social class over another).

The primary meaning of the truth of the words of Scripture goes through the acceptance of their divine origin:[7] the words are of the Father, of the Son, who is Himself an arch-original Word, and of the Holy Spirit, who inspires them. Words of a God who "is love" (1 John 4: 8), they articulate the call that must be interpreted, heeded, and transformed into life.[8]

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[6] For an interpretation of overcoming radical transcendence by appealing to the Revelation, see Nicolae Turcan, "Transcendence and Revelation: from Phenomenology to Theology," *Dialogo* 2, no. 2 (March 2016), https://doi.org/10.18638/dialogo.2015.2.2.8.

[7] See Michel Henry, "Cuvânt și religie: Cuvântul lui Dumnezeu" [Word and Religion: The Word of God], in *Fenomenologie și teologie* [Phenomenology and Theology], by Jean-Louis Chrétien et al. (Iași: Polirom, 1996).

[8] See, for the topic of religious call, Nicolae Turcan, "Religious Call in Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: A Theo-Phenomenological Approach." *Religions* 11, no. 12 (2020): 653. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11120653.

There are numerous scriptural contexts that emphasize the importance of words and their divine origin. God speaks in the words of men, yet His words are "trustworthy and true" (Rev. 21:5). They are prophetic words that are fulfilled, put by God in the mouths of men (Jeremiah 1:9), words whose meaning is a perpetual calling to faith and which help to gain faith: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17). Then, they are words to be heard: "And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deut. 18:19). They are commandments and teachings that become a covenant, thus having a dual structure, religious and ethical:[9] "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" (Ex. 34:27); "And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:28). The ethical function of these words, even when they are human and not divine, turns them into a criterion of judgment: "for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:37). Last but not least, the words of God are the words of eternal life: "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'" (John 6:68). When uttered by God, these words are eternal: "but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1Pet. 1:25); "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). Therefore, the relevance of words also extends to man's relationship with God.

The First One

In a well-known paragraph, Wittgenstein stated that "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[10] The Revelation and the Incarnation, however, demand the opposite.

God spoke in the Old Testament—"the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15:1); Christ, the Word, spoke in the New Testament; therefore, man cannot be silent, even when he understands the role that silence plays in his speech, on the edge even when he talks about silence. It is just as legitimate to speak of silence in our discursive and predicative language as it is to be silent about the Word, in the contemplation that succeeds pure prayer, where words are left behind. Although silence has its role, opening towards the incomprehensible and ineffable mystery, it does

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[9] Giorgio Agamben calls this ethical involvement of the speaker in his word the "sacrament of language". See Giorgio Agamben, *Sacramentul limbajului. Arheologia jurământului* [The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath], trans. Alex Cistelecan (Cluj-Napoca: TACT, 2011), 83.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

not nullify the legitimacy of words. Words and silence have different and complementary functions, and the absolute discourse of theology is based on the priority of the absolute discourse of God. Revelation itself provides the conditions of possibility for our speaking about God.

Therefore, we can speak about God because He spoke first.[11] „God has the initiative in the dialogue through the word."[12] The prologue to the Gospel of John says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Christ, the Logos, first spoke to us and His words express, according to patristic interpretation, the ideas by which He has created the world. When He speaks, the Word establishes a difference between Himself and the beings that He brings into existence. It is the difference between created and uncreated, an insurmountable ontological difference, which words express and which faith celebrates.

Words pave the way for a communion between God and man. As such, they are a part of life and they give voice to a transcendence that would otherwise remain incomprehensible. Not meant only for theoretical, denotative discourses, God's words are effective, performative, opening the door to true life for those who believe in them. The message of the Gospel of John is that "the Logos is life". It does not matter here whether the Logos-Christ and the logos of Greek philosophy are similar, as the apologists of the first centuries of Christianity believed,[13] or different, as Heidegger asserted;[14] all that matters is that the logos meets life[15] and that the purpose of words lies precisely within this true, divine life in communion with God.

Man is called to respond to God's words through his life and love and through his analogous words—as truth and justice: "Whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1Pet. 4:11)

Following the same divine pattern, our words turn towards the Word, crossing through dialogue, to a certain extent, the abyss between created

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[11] "If we affirm that 'we love, because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19), we can also affirm that we speak, because he has first spoken." James K. A. Smith, *Speech and theology: language and the logic of Incarnation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 155.

[12] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia ortodoxă* [Spirituality and Communion in the Orthodox Liturgy], 2 ed. (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004), 147.

[13] Sf. Iustin Martirul și Filosoful, "Apologia a doua în favoarea creștinilor. Către Senatul roman" [The Second Apology], in *Apologeți de limbă greacă* [Greek Apologists], PSB (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980 1980), 2, 13.

[14] Martin Heidegger, *Introducere în metafizică* [Introduction to Metaphysics], trans. Gabriel Liiceanu and Thomas Kleininger, Paradigme, (București: Humanitas, 1999), 180–81.

[15] Michel Henry, *Cuvintele lui Hristos* [Words of Christ], trans. Ioan I. Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2005), 90.

and uncreated. Man speaks of / with God from what he has received, namely from the Revelation and the work of grace, even if his speech happens to contain his own words as well.

Heidegger's idea that "we are a dialogue"[16] expresses both the unity achieved through dialogue and the importance of this dialogue for the human Dasein. According to father Stăniloae, this dialogue includes not only words, but also nature itself.[17] Therefore, man responds to the absolute discourse of God with his own absolute discourse, an answer that engages more than mere utterance: it engages a change of self, passion, and deification. When it becomes prayer, the desire to establish a connection that transcends words motivates the absolute discourse, seeking a communion of life and love with the Beloved. Words have their own way of building the way back, but their power to give life—the life of God—comes from beyond their icons.

Diacritical Language

Multiple Styles of Theology

And, indeed, theology speaks of God through prayer: "the theologian is the one who prays and the one who prays is the theologian."[18] The language of God cannot be merely representational, for God does not stand as an empirical referent and descriptions of Him are never sufficient. Could we say that language is "constructive", "fictional", having a productive role, creating God from the bottom up, from our transcendental conditions? The present text answers this question in the negative. With its ambitious aim of comprehending the incomprehensible, theological language should be understood iconically as a language that continuously refers to what is beyond itself, although not in pure arbitrariness. Through the references it proposes, theological language rather creates the outline of a meeting, the place of waiting, the prerequisites for recognizing the divine by the same measure as those for knowing it. The paradox of theology is that it is both

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[16] Martin Heidegger, *Originea operei de artă* [The Origin of the Work of Art], trans. Thomas Kleininger and Gabriel Liiceanu (București: Humanitas, 1995), 228.

[17] See Olivier Clément, "Cel mai mare teolog ortodox din secolul XX" [The Greatest Orthodox Theologian of the Twentieth Century], in *Omagiu memoriei Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae* [Tribute to the Memory of Father Dumitru Stăniloae], ed. Ioanichie Bălan (Iași: Mitropolia Moldovei și Bucovinei, 1994), 136.

[18] Evagrie Ponticul, "Cuvânt despre rugăciune" [Discourse on Prayer], in *Filocalia* [The Philokalia], ed. and trans. Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Harisma, 1993), § 60. Jean-Louis Chrétien also wrote about the importance of prayer for the foundation of the religious: "With prayer the religious appears and disappears." Jean-Louis Chrétien, "Cuvântul rănit" [The Wounded Word], in *Fenomenologie și teologie* [Phenomenology and Theology] (Iași: Polirom, 1996), 37.

discernment—because it accurately distinguishes truth from untruth, starting from Revelation and from the life of the Church—and *ineffability*, because it admits that can express the mystery of divine existence and love only partially, allowing the experience of language to be enriched by the experience of God.

As a polyphonic and diverse language,[19] passing from narration to hymns, through epistles, prophecies, ethical commands, fragments of wisdom, etc., religious language expresses more than facts and references. Despite the multiplicity of genres, the discourse on God is called to become a discourse of praise, doxology, and prayer. Different periods favored different types of discourse which were more or less adequate to religious thought. The type of language only becomes a problem insofar as it wants to take center stage and consider itself the only one entitled to create a meaningful theology. But, like the Holy Scripture, theology accepts multiple discourses.[20] The problem is not that one discourse would be more appropriate than another, because each could have a different and complementary function, possibly in a hierarchy ranging from prose and narrative to prayer; rather, the danger lies within the dominant claim of philosophical discourse to be able to express everything in the name of reason. It is not unintelligible for the truth and falsehood of an absolute discourse to be decided elsewhere, by the Absolute—and clearly this is not the truth that is decided at the level of the utterance,[21] but the religious, existential one.

As I have said, absolute discourse is also the discourse of God Himself, whose words have come all the way down to us and establish a tradition regarded as sacred by those who belong to it. Hence, one should evaluate the absolute discourse of man according to its hermeneutic agreement with this tradition, which continues the Biblical Revelation. One could decide the veracity of the words about God by appealing to the Tradition of the Church, to that context of the "game of language"[22] specific to spiritual life, to the existence of true faith, and to the worthiness of the utterer (worthiness that inevitably involves experience, ethics, asceticism, and liturgy).[23] It is time to rediscover the movement that flows through all the discourses of

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[19] Paul Ricoeur emphasized this polyphony of Scripture in Paul Ricœur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios" [Experience and Language in Religious Discourse], in *Fenomenologie și teologie* [Phenomenology and Theology] (Iași: Polirom, 1996), 26–36.

[20] See Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Prezență și parusie* [Presence and Parousia], trans. Sorin Ovidiu Podar (Cluj-Napoca: Viața Creștină, 2012), 151–70.

[21] See Platon, *Sofistul* [Sophist], in *Opere* [Works], vol. VI, trans. Sorin Vieru et al. (București: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), 261–62c.

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Cercetări filosofice* [Philosophical Investigations]. trans. Mircea Dumitru, Mircea Flonta, and Adrian-Paul Iliescu (București: Humanitas, 2004), § 7.

[23] See Nicolae Turcan, "Liturgy and Apophaticism," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021), 721, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090721.

theology; the movement that, while passing from one discourse to another, does not invalidate the previous discourse, nor does it throw it into nothingness or synthesize it to recover it dialectically somewhere else, but rather enriches it in this back-and-forth of religious experience expressed in words.

There is a language that has a diacritical role, which expresses the defining truths of faith for the members of a community, a language whose function is to distinguish between truth and untruth, according to its agreement with the orthodoxy of tradition. This is the antinomic language of dogmas. At the same time, there is also the Reality beyond dogmas, one which words try to express as much as they possibly can.

Christian Dogmas:
Truth and Accuracy

Writing, as Derrida said, is "the element of any revelation."[24] For the absolute discourse of theology—whether written or oral—, the separation between truth and untruth that words delineate is of a definite importance. The significance of a religious sentence may be true, but that sentence might not be verified according to the criteria of scientific knowledge; its plausibility will then be tested in the conditions of a future world. Meanwhile, on this side of the *eschaton*, the Tradition of the Church becomes the criterion of judgment.

The Ecumenical Councils have formulated the main dogmas of Christian faith in the most appropriate language possible. Undoubtedly, dogma is both the language and the meaning that language conveys; it is both signifier and signified. While the signifier (the word) has its relevance—for example, Hellenistic philosophy has provided terms for dogmatic formulations—, the truth exceeds the expression. The additional understanding that experience brings is infinite compared to the concept. As benchmarks for an experience of the truth of faith, dogmatic paradoxes testify that theology is, in fact, a "mystical theology."[25] Dogmas try to communicate the mystery that they partially express; they are "antinomies transfigured by the mystery they want to represent."[26]

Although related to the historical and philosophical context in which it appeared, the language used in dogmas expresses the truth of faith with a certain precision and, as a result, has become normative for the Church. This is a virtue meant not to close thought once and for all, for thought can

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[24] Jacques Derrida, *Credință și Cunoaștere. Veacul și iertarea* [Faith and Knowledge], trans. Emilian Cioc (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2004), 10.

[25] Vladimir Lossky masterfully emphasized this connection between theology and mysticism in Vladimir Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 2005).

[26] Lucian Blaga, *Eonul dogmatic* [The Dogmatic Aeon] (București: Humanitas, 1993), 47.

gloss through complementary and multiple hermeneutics, but to call to life, to experience, and even to make mystical experience possible for the generations to come. If we accept that no formulation by concepts and without experience can fully express the dogmatic truth—which is the Kantian definition of onto-theology[27]—, then no one should consider dogmas as onto-theological traits. Based on God's Revelation, the dogmas point to spiritual life and their truth, though formulated, needs the syntheses and the agreement of personal experience with the spiritual tradition of the Church.

The constructivist question may return: if dogmas are so necessary and if their language has become normative, isn't experience a result of them? The answer is, once again, negative, because dogmas delineate an experience and certify it to a certain extent as not being a non-Christian experience, such as the experience of an impersonal sacred. Apart from their epistemological prestige, dogmas also have a *diacritical* function for spiritual life, because they help to discern between different experiences; they are both the *knowledge* of the truth and its *recognition*. Not all religious experiences are divine, even if they may be exceptional phenomena of limit and mystery or, in the language of Jean-Luc Marion, "saturated phenomena."[28]

The multiplicity of theological styles and discourses—from the predicative one all the way to prayer—does not impose a multiplicity of contradictory meanings that would throw theology into relativism and conflict with dogmas. The discernment of dogmas belongs to Tradition, whose purpose is to transmit the original faith in Christ, as the Church has preserved it from the beginning. The diacritical language of dogmas requires a certain understanding and a certain way of living. By pointing to life and not declaring itself self-sufficient, the diacritical discourse of dogmas is kenotic. When the dogma says something about God, it does not intend to say everything that could be said, but rather to emphasize the truth of Revelation. The words of theology teach and follow the kenosis of the Word Himself, without weakening the truth or the calling formulated through words.[29]

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[27] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), A 632, B 60.

[28] Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 31–53. See a comment in Nicolae Turcan, *Apologia după sfârșitul metafizicii. Teologie și fenomenologie la Jean-Luc Marion* [Apology after the End of Metaphysics: Theology and Phenomenology in Jean-Luc Marion] (București: Eikon, 2016), 257–71.

[29] Gianni Vattimo proposes an interpretation of *kenosis* as a continuous *kenosis* of God in history. According to this postmodern interpretation, God humbles Himself so much that He accepts sin and secularization as a fulfillment of Christianity. Christianity can give up morality, the Church, truth, but not charity. I provided a critique of this postmodern opinion in Nicolae Turcan, *Postmodernism și teologie apofatică* [Postmodernism and Apophatic Theology]

Church Tradition is, therefore, normative. By encompassing not only the transmission of certain teachings and ways of life, but also the continual work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the Tradition is a tradition of life and witness. Father Georges Florovsky wrote: „Christological formulas are fully meaningful only for those who have encountered the Living Christ, and have received and acknowledged Him as God and Saviour, and are dwelling by faith in Him, in His body, the Church."[30] As a hermeneutics appropriate to Revelation and, therefore, not reduced solely to man's interpretive ability, the hermeneutics of the holy text involves both the dialogue with the Referent to whom the text refers and the moral and religious transformation of man, which can be seen in the *metanoia* (change of mind, repentance). In this hermeneutics, the interpreter asks for the grace of the Holy Spirit to help him understand, which makes it more than a philological, historical-critical, or philosophical work. The transcendental, constituted by the conditions of possibility for a hermeneutics, is an achieved transcendental: the grace of the Holy Spirit. "It is not the text that gives us access to the truth, but the Truth that gives us access to Himself,"[31] according to Michel Henry.

We have seen that the dogmatic language, as an iconic language, is both paradoxical and adequate. Dogmas are antinomic, using the formula "both…, and…"; they accept, with the power of the Revelation, truths that change logic into theology. Such a way of thinking, born at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, brings about the beginning of antinomy into European thought or, in the words of Constantin Noica, the "birth of Europe"[32] as a way of thinking different from that of Antiquity. Is this a different logos than the Greek one, as Michel Henry suggested? The presence of the dogmatic paradox does not cancel out how thought normally works, so the Greek logic was enriched by another logic, an antinomic one, whose purpose is to express faith. Even if the paradox appears wherever life appears, because life goes beyond logic, it only temporarily suspends logic and it does not apply to all of reality. One could state the principle: "to different realities, different logics." God's Revelation made itself explicit with the help of the dogmatic antinomy, of the logic of "both…, and…," which violated the principle of non-contradiction. Here are a few examples: both the Father is God, and the Son is God; Christ is both the true God and

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(Floreşti, Cluj: Limes, 2014).

[30] Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 109.

[31] Michel Henry, *Eu sunt Adevărul. Pentru o filozofie a* [I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity], trans. Ioan I. Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2000), 47.

[32] Constantin Noica, *Despre demnitatea Europei* [About the Dignity of Europe], 2 ed. (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2012), 62.

the true man; Christ has both divine will and human will—and the list could go on. Dogmas enjoy the unanimous appreciation of the theology of the Church because they are precise enough to express the mystery and to preserve, through formulation, an opening towards the fullness of life to which man is called.

Overcoming, Referral, and Negations

The Reality and the Experience of Words

There are several transcendences that the word itself proposes; the first of these transcendences is that of the reference or reality that the words speak of through concepts. The Aristotelian tripartition between language, thought, and reality is involved here.[33] An experience of words that describe reality (and therefore an experience of language), no matter how poetic, is not on the same level as the experience of meeting reality itself, a truth even more obvious as it refers to more than the objective world and the empirical phenomena. So, the question is not whether language says something about reality—because it obviously does—but whether language can recreate an experience of reality, whether it can be an experience identical to that of living that reality. The short answer is that it never succeeds completely. Of course, one should accept the creative function of language: words produce experience and they can become experience. But this experience of language differs from the experience of the original reality. The creative experience of words takes place either in the space of analogy, when it says something about the original experience, or in the space of difference, when it uses words as a starting point to create a new experience, an experience that deviates from the original one.

Ethics, Asceticism, and Language

Apart from the experience of external reality, we must also consider an internal experience of self-affection, which appears as a new overcoming of words by experience. Ethical and ascetic commitment, as well as the questioning one's own self in the adventure of meeting God, transcend language. Levinas radically critiqued ontology by affirming ethics as a primary philosophy. Suspecting the Same while affirming the Other gives rise to a philosophy of otherness that meets both religious thought and the language of the Scripture. Ethics, however, involves asceticism as an inner experience, a renunciation of oneself in favor of the other, a capacity for sacrifice.

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[33] Aristotel, *Categorii. Despre interpretare* [Categories. On Interpretation], trans. Constantin Noica (București: Humanitas, 2005), 20v–21r.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus said that speaking of God is commendable, but more commendable is "suffering for God."[34] But knowledge is not limited to language or expression; it also encompasses the act of taking upon oneself, in one's own body, in one's own suffering, the truth of the One who has suffered for us. It is an ascetic assumption by which the analogy of suffering doubles the analogy of language. The shift in emphasis is enormous: we cannot speak about language when language speaks of suffering.

The overcoming of words by experience is even more visible in apophatic theology. Negating the concepts that describe God does not reveal nothingness, but rather He who is above any name and word. Viewed as more than a celebration of mystery as a mystery, apophatic theology speaks of the ineffable and over-discursive experience of meeting the personal God. In apophatic theology, there is no human transcendental that produces the experience; this becomes possible only through the work of grace.

There is a significant difference between the genuine experience of *unio mystica* and the language that attempts to describe this experience. Many authors in the Christian tradition affirm the ineffability of the mystical experience and the inability of words to describe it properly. For example, the Greek patristic tradition forever denies the ability to know and to describe God in His being;[35] however, it affirms the possibility of knowing God and the real experience of God through His uncreated energies.

Language expresses the mystical experience insufficiently. The difference between language and reality reveals the inability of words to produce a similar experience and to express it adequately by using the absolute discourse. There is a constant back-and-forth between experience and language in a reciprocal, indefinite, and unequal inception, an oscillation that captures the one who thinks, believes, and prays. It also reveals an essential transcendence for the absolute discourse: through the addition of knowledge, even inexpressible knowledge, mystical experience transcends language.

Words as Icons

We call *iconic* those concepts that do not objectify, do not reify the ineffable, but only refer to it, through a structure common to the index, the religious symbol, and the icon.[36] The icon, unlike the index and the symbol, is high-

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[34] Sf. Grigore de Nazianz, *Cele 5 cuvântări teologice* [Five Theological Orations], trans. Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Anastasia, 1993).

[35] Marion called such a statement "negative certainty," see Jean-Luc Marion, *Certitudini negative* [Negative Certainties], trans. Maria-Cornelia Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2013).

[36] It is the tripartition proposed by Charles S. Pierce to describe the relationship between the sign and its object Charles S. Pierce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 102–03. Although we start from this trichotomy, we

lighted by a resemblance to what it looks like, through a sort of non-arbitrariness. From a religious standpoint, the difference between icon and idol is a defining feature. Jean-Luc Marion describes this difference as the distance that the icon shows in relation to the prototype that it represents. The idol turns its gaze towards the viewer, turning into self-idolatry, whereas the icon looks further towards the prototype visible in it.

If we think of religious language as iconic, then we can say that it is a space of passage, a sort of non-place.[37] Stored in language, a religious experience only remains there with the sole purpose of becoming something other than language—an experience similar to the one described. The dignity of language as a non-place of passage does not come from its location, but rather from its iconicity. Man feels the force of that which comes from beyond language and which is revealed in part by language, as a call. The absolute language of theology is, therefore, deeply intentional: its importance is given more by what it refers to rather than what it can adequately describe.

Affirmations and Negations

Lucian Blaga argued that dogmatic thought and apophatic theology are different. Dogmatic thought affirms concepts which fall into antinomies that overcome logic, whereas apophatic theology denies concepts, but its thought remains within the boundaries of logic.[38] Logically, when dealing with contradictions, they are both antinomies: the former violates the principle of contradiction and the latter violates the principle of the excluded third. From the point of view of religious experience, dogmatic statements are antinomic because they attempt to express a mystery, an ineffable reality. But apophatic theology, through its negative concepts, aims, in fact, at the same reality that escapes thought, at the same ineffable mystery of God, who is irreducible to language. Thus, from the perspective of a phenomenology of overcoming, we can answer that dogmatic statements and apophatic negations have in common the intentional structure of overcoming towards an experience of a different order than the linguistic one. Both dogmatic antinomies and the negations of apophatic theology express the unlimited mystery of the living God that words cannot truly express.

As an exaggeration, one might argue that, while antinomic statements are the manner in which God speaks to us, the side of the divine Revelation

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will use theological considerations to understand the iconic structure. Also, from a philosophical point of view, we will rely on the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion, who proposes, in accordance with the tradition of the Church, a fundamental distinction between icon and idol.

[37] Foucault spoke of the "non-place of language." Michel Foucault, *Cuvintele și lucrurile* [Words and Things], trans. Bogdan Ghiu and Mircea Vasilescu (București: RAO, 2008), 41.

[38] Blaga, *The Dogmatic Aeon*, 79–84.

oriented towards the world, apophatic denials are man's way back to the ineffable God. In fact, if they share the same referral structure, one can affirm more precisely that both refer to mystical experience. God's grace works both in the human exercise of apophatic negations and in the dogmatic antinomies and truths of faith revealed throughout history. In both situations, working together is involved. How much man works and how much God works has to do with the truth of a dynamic that depends on many factors, such as man's spiritual age or the providence of God. What matters for the absolute discourse is that this path is no longer language, but the transcendence of language, with the goal of meeting God in mystical experience. The affirmations of faith (cataphatic theology) and the negations (apophatic theology) are not in fact opposed to each other, as St. Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite asserted.[39] The absolute discourse of man transcends itself as it is uttered and the all-benevolent grace of Transcendence itself works in this transcendence, which seeks an experience beyond words.

Answers and Experience

Some Answers

Throughout these pages, I have highlighted several answers to the issues presented at the beginning of the text. First of all, God's choice to reveal Himself overcomes the paradox of transcendence. This means that language will describe what it can describe without canceling out what it cannot express—the indescribable, the ineffable, the unknowable. Because we need to consider both dimensions—dogmatic antinomies and apophatic theology—, language describes without exhausting, without closing, without the pride of exhaustive knowledge; language makes way for super-conceptual experience, without annihilating it, without reducing it to nothingness. Apophatic theology uses the language of negations, but those negations do not annihilate; they are the iconic negations that refer to the non-place where language is no longer heard and where only silence can still understand something. Although this is an experience of a different order than language, it is an experience prepared to a certain extent by both the diacritical language of dogmas and by the apophatic negations that Scripture formulates.

The experience of God is both knowledge and lack thereof, even if, as a last resort, the former may appeal to the latter. The richness of the Revelation establishes the possibility of an infinite hermeneutics, but it does not invalidate the difference in nature between God and man, between uncreated

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[39] See Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, "The Mystical Theology," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1000B.

and created, just as it does not annihilate the unknowability of God's being. When it speaks of both knowledge and ignorance, the Church Tradition does not give voice to two spiritual traditions, but rather speaks of a single, paradoxical one, in which the transcendent God reveals Himself out of love for His creation. Between the transcendence of God and human knowledge there are not only concepts and analogies, but also the existential reality of divine grace. The experience of God is blinding and ineffable. Even when words do have a role, that role is fulfilled by the work of grace.

Secondly, there are several answers to the issue of the violence of metaphysical language. (1) The modern violence of the concept in relation to the phenomenon it reduces does not mean that it is impossible to reinterpret concepts outside the metaphysics of its presence and violence. Such hermeneutics could rely on a non-objectifying, iconic language.[40] (2) Weak thought, proposed by Gianni Vattimo, is not the only solution to the violence of metaphysics, nor is it the most appropriate one, especially as long as he views religious relativism as a solution. Over time, theology has overcome the violence of metaphysics in the name of peace, of love, of the kenosis of Christ, as well as in the name of the mystical experience that apophatic theology proposes.

Thirdly, when faced with the onto-theological criticism of metaphysics, we might answer that it involves a problematic view of language. It is at least inappropriate to believe that language can replace experience, especially when speaking about God. Precisely through metaphor and paradox, the language of theology reveals its "intersubjective dimension"[41] and its extra-linguistic purpose: that of calling and leading, to a certain extent, to the personal encounter with God. Of course, it is not just a matter of saying and listening to what is being said; what happens is a body-and-soul commitment on man's behalf with the purpose of gaining divine life.

The role of the absolute discourse of theology, as diacritical thinking, is to free the Absolute from the idolatry of reason. A philosophy that confuses the Divine Absolute with its various worldly forms — most of which are of the order of excess and limit — is a non-religious philosophy. Even when viewed only in terms of horizontality, even without a transcendent referent, the movement towards the absolute—absolutism—is present in the logic of the world. And absolutism is the false form of the absolute, the one which has lost its relationship with God; it is another idol that, sometimes paradoxically, refers to the one who builds it precisely through deconstruction.

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[40] That is what Smith proposes in *Speech and theology*, 79.

[41] Coșeriu distinguished between the objective dimension of language, that of being object-oriented, and the intersubjective one. Eugeniu Coșeriu, *Istoria filozofiei limbajului: de la începuturi până la Rousseau* [The History of the Philosophy of Language: From the Beginnings to Rousseau], trans. Eugen Munteanu and Mădălina Ungureanu (București: Humanitas, 2011), 43.

God is mystery, an incomprehensible mystery, but this mystery does not become an idol, nor does it become nothing. The mystery also does not take the place of God; through mystical experience, theology speaks of the manifestation and encounter of the personal God, not of the mystery without the divine, of nothing, or of the negation as negation.

Fourthly, when faced with the question of the ambivalence and even the ambiguity of language, capable of equally expressing truth and falsehood, one could answer that, in the religious context analyzed here, i.e. the Christian one, the origin and the source of the text are the ones that give the truth: if the text is revealed, then the truth is revealed. By accepting that we need to read the text with the firm belief that God is its author, the truth beneath the words reveals itself in their linguistic meaning and in their super-linguistic call, which is the call to deification (*theosis*).

What all these answers have in common is the relationship between language and experience: in each case, *words refer to what is beyond them, having an iconic function, towards an ineffable, mystical, and interpersonal experience*. Thinking and speaking in the absence of this experience can be an exercise in transmitting a tradition or a truth; however, this truth would be insufficient, for the role of words in the life of the Church is to sustain this life and to make people sons of God. And words, insofar as they express this life, do not exhaust it, but formulate its call and point to what is beyond them, just like icons do. Although inevitable, absolute language remains insufficient. It refers to the experience of meeting the One who is impossible to name in the same way in which we name the things and realities of this world.

Experience and Words

To conclude, there are several moments in understanding the absolute discourse of the Revelation and, by extension, of theology. The *hermeneutic moment* involves the understanding of the meanings of words and of the commandments of the Holy Scripture, of expressions and calls; in short, of the apostolic kerygma, as a proclamation of the truth of faith and as a calling to the fullness of life. The *moment of faith* means believing in the truth of these words, in their divine origin, in their exceptionality and in their impossibility for us, which is possible for God—"for all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). We could then speak of the *ethical and ascetic moment*, in which man responds to the words of the call by his own ministry—from liturgy and prayer to the service of his neighbor—, by constantly engaging in asceticism and self-denial, regardless of his level. Last but not least, we can talk about the *moment of joy*, of living the mysterious presence of God through the work of His grace unknown to the world, "whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him" (John 14:17). A view of two extremes accompanies this moment: on the one hand, there is

the view of one's own nothingness, according to which man is little more than nothing, earth meant to return to earth, dust and ashes; on the other hand, there is the view of the greatness of the call: man is, by the work of God's grace, destined for deification and communion with his Creator. No dialectic suppresses either extreme, for humility deepens as we progress in our work towards deification.

This presentation is certainly neither unique nor exhaustive; it does, however, have the advantage of following a path that is not just of words. There are, of course, words that accompany the moments mentioned earlier, just as there are moments of silence that carry more meaning than words could express. Regardless of the form and level at which it appears, the absolute discourse reveals the iconic structure of the words used, as well as the difference between expression and experience. But words become richer and richer in meaning as experience ignites and enlightens them. Mystical experience can be certified and confirmed by the meaning that dogmas express in words; but this experience cannot be replaced by the words resulted from it. In the absence of the iconic understanding of the words of the Revelation and in the absence of the experience that gives them legitimacy, the absolute discourse ultimately remains insufficient. Without experiencing God, words lose their authentic meaning and can be manipulated by the onto-theological ego, which is defined precisely by the refusal of experience. They can serve violence and idolatry, ambiguity and lack of meaning, evil and falsehood. Ultimately, only mystical experience and spiritual life give value to the absolute discourse of theology, transforming its words and meanings into linguistic and conceptual icons that point to the Absolute Referent, simultaneously called Word and Being, Life and Love.

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