*III. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*

# KENOTIC DIALOGUE – A PARADIGM FOR CHRISTIANS' RELATIONS WITH THEIR NEIGHBORS

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**ABSTRACT.** This article represents an attempt to argue that if we are to apply Christ's kenosis to our relationships, then a kenotic dialogue will be the appropriate way to interact with others. Starting from Martin Buber and some Christian thinkers, this paper will also emphasize the relational dimension of God's image in human beings and the subsequent dialogue this image entails. Assuming the premise that Jesus Christ is the perfect human expression of God's image and that this reality also impacts our human nature, the consequence might be that his kenotic dialogue with the world prompts an analog dialogue between God and us (in prayers) and between our neighbors and us. Because kenosis can be a tricky concept, it is adequate to mention that the kenotic perspective employed in this paper is that set out by the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae. Finally, we hope to convince the reader that Christ's kenosis is simultaneously the foundation and the model for our relationships network and enables us to a new way of interacting with people.

**Keywords:** dialogue, relationships, communion, kenosis, the image of God.

### Introduction

When social hostility is so acute that dialogue can sometimes seem an inaccessible or useless luxury, it becomes urgent and necessary to reflect on a theme that addresses the foundations of a possible dialogue with one's neighbor. In what follows, we will explore the possible basis for such a dialogue, which leans upon the relational dimension of the image of God in man and the very

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definition of the human person. All Christians have Jesus Christ, the God-Man, as their supreme role model. From an Eastern Orthodox theological perspective, the incarnation cannot be considered without the kenosis of the Son, and this kenosis has consequences for his and our human nature. Therefore, it is assumed that an essential aspect of humanity – such as relationships – has kenotic features in the case of those who claim faith in the Christian God. Moreover, the person, defined by and placed in a relational network, cannot be imagined without dialogue. We will therefore seek and analyze the kenotic dimension of this dialogue.

### Relationship and dialogue

Any discussion about otherness and the relational foundation of the human person has, at least in the Modern era, a solid landmark in Martin Buber's thought, which reasserts the absolute priority of relational over individual existence decisively and establishes some essential references when starting from the prologue of John's Gospel.[2] He lays down axioms such as "In the beginning is a relation" or "Through the Thou a man becomes I."[3] Furthermore, these are based on the "primary word *I-Thou*" which "establishes the world of relations."[4] Buber can therefore speak about the "effort to establish a relation," the "mold for the soul," and "the inborn Thou," denouncing the inconsistency of the individualistic definition of the human being.[5]

Many Christian thinkers will take advantage of this modern landmark established by Buber and enter into a dialogue with him, highlighting the compatibility of Christian teaching with this perspective and demonstrating its biblical and theological soundness. According to Denis de Rougemont, the notion of person, as defined by Christianity, is truly revolutionary and can only be understood against the backdrop of the formulations and distinctions laid down at the Councils/Synods of Nicaea and Chalcedon, where the divine and human natures are distinguished in the hypostasis of Jesus Christ.[6] Moreover, the person exists as far as he/she is relationally grounded.

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[2] Cf. Ioan Augustin Doinaş, "Preface", in Martin Buber, *Eu şi tu*, trans. Ştefan Augustin Doinaş (Bucharest, Humanitas, 1992), 14.

[3] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 18, 28.

[4] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 6.

[5] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 54.

[6] Juerg Haener, *From Denis de Rougemont's thought to the concept of European citizenship: divergence or convergence?* (Master's diss., Institut Européen de l'Université de Genève, Geneva, 2011), 12-14.

In an anthropological context, Alistair McFadyen argues that human relationships with God *"are structured from [His] side as a dialogue"* meant to provide "space for free human response," and thus, humans are designated, in Buberian terms, as a *Thou by the* divine *Self*.[7] Dialogue is therefore ontologically subsistent in human beings since relations are embedded in the divine image according to which they were created, and the human person is invited to respond to a preexistent call from the beginning.

The Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae also seems to think along this line since, for him, the interpersonal relationship holds such a great significance - in an anthropological perspective – that one can speak of a "communicational anthropology," in which otherness is essentially "dialogical" and it is constituted "as a circumscription of a communitarian personalism."[8] Indeed, when addressing the question of the divine image in human beings, Stăniloae constantly speaks about the relation.[9] And about an unceasing dialogue with God and with one's neighbor.[10] On the other hand, the same author identifies this image with "the capacity to become the subject of divine love."[11] A capacity that cannot be reflected upon outside a relational and dialogical framework, for the word finds its fulfillment in the communion of persons.[12] In order to do some justice to the discussion of the image (while mentioning that the analysis of the various interpretations is not an objective of this article) in Stăniloae's thinking, it must be said that, according to Eastern Orthodox theology, the image is complemented by the likeness, where the image is the longing for God (or the possibility for a relation with Him). The likeness is the process and destination of the conformity with the absolute model of the image – a process designated by the term *deification*.[13] If we look at the historical debates[14] Although the image is not reduced merely to the relational aspect, it necessarily includes it as one of its decisive and inescapable aspects. The fundamental character of the relational dimension is revealed in that, to acquire likeness, a human being (as a bearer of the image) needs communion. Furthermore, this communion means a relationship with God and, consequently, a personal relationship with one's neighbor; otherwise,

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[7] Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood. A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19 (italics added).

[8] Sandu Frunză, *O antropologie mistică. Introducere în gândirea Părintelui Stăniloae* (ed. a II-a, Bucureşti, Eikon, 2016), 47, 56. Note: All the translations from Romanian sources were rendered by the author of this paper.

[9] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, (ed. a II-a, vol. I, Bucureşti, Editura IBMBOR, 1997), 267 sqq.

[10] See, for example, Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. I, 269.

[11] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Bucureşti, Basilica, 2014, 91.

[12] Cf. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea*, 111.

[13] See the discussion in Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. I, 270-273.

[14] Marc Cortez gives a valuable and concise inventory in the chapter "Imago Dei" of his book *Theological Anthropology. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London & New York, T&T Clark, 2010).

there could be no relationship with God. Love of God necessarily results in love for one's neighbor.[15] Even the selfish – or, to use another term, individualistic – man "cannot escape from the ontological bond with others," not even when he/she tries to use them or turn them into objects of one's desires.[16]

Stăniloae overlaps the status of a "communicating God's dialogue partner" with the very "unceasing persistence of [his] image" in human beings, "[f]or the image is revealed in human's dialogue with God."[17] Thus, for the Romanian theologian, dialogue is not an optional function of the person. However, instead, it structures the person ontologically and existentially since he/she exists only under the dialogue initiated by God and is permanently invited to participate in this dialogue. The Orthodox thinker states categorically that no "I" can be defined as long as it is not opposed to and imposed by a "*you*," a "you" that challenges "I" and one that "I" must enter into dialogue with, must pay attention to, contemplate and understand, simultaneously understanding oneself concerning this distinct "you," in the ambiance of faith and love.[18]

Starting from the same Buber, but taking the discussion further and adding important psychological nuances, Paul Tournier can state that this capacity to enter into dialogue makes possible, from a psychological point of view, the distinction between the individual and the person, for "the individual associates, [while] the person lives communion."[19] The individual is defined by separateness while the person by relationship, but the individual and the person are two poles between which human beings move in a dynamic in which either the traits of the individual or those of the person predominate at any given moment.[20] Moreover, in terms of theological anthropology, it can be noticed that what makes a difference between the individual from the person is the type of relationship that people engage in, for it is the individual who has lost the kind of harmony which is inherent to the person and this loss affects human nature itself. Here lies our self-sufficiency, breaking the unity that stems from the communion – which translates the "participation in communion with God."[21]

It could be objected that those who do not know God or believe in him are not actually in dialogue with the Creator. However, "even he who hates this name and imagines himself to be without God if he wholeheartedly utters the Thou of his life – the one that nobody can limit – he is addressing God."[22] And from a

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[15] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. I, 274-277.

[16] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. I, 273.

[17] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* (București, Basilica, 2013), 39, 56.

[18] Cf. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea*, 32-40.

[19] Paul Tournier, *Personajul și persoana*, trans. Rodica Bogdan (Oradea, Decenu.eu, 2020), 144.

[20] Buber, *I and Thou*, 89-90.

[21] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. I, 279.

[22] Buber, *I and Thou*, 104.

theological perspective, those who "because of [their] non-communication remit to a minimum of existence,"[23] neither lose the divine image nor can completely interrupt the dialogue. Christ himself identified with humans in their separation from God.[24] Furthermore, we can say that as humans, he assumed the status of non-communication with the Father, without this separation being absolute and irreparable. Nevertheless, we can never experience the intensity of the feeling of abandonment in the same manner as Jesus did on the cross. Moreover, at the human level, whenever a moment of authentic dialogue is established between two people, each of them also enters into a silent dialogue with God, and this happens "even if the man is unfaithful or thinks he is unfaithful [...] every time the scale of values is at stake in the inner struggle, every time a man relates to a norm of truth, beauty, good, right."[25] Consequently, human being lives their personhood within these two *personal* dialogues, which are closely linked but do not necessarily occur in synchronicity, and rarely reach those crucial and memorable moments of maximum intensity.[26]

It seems legitimate to say that, from what has been discussed up to this point, the idea emerges that the human person can only be defined by taking into account this innate relational dimension. That relationship presupposes engagement in an existential and communitarian dialogue, which is also an ontological aspect of existence. This quality of the person derives from the fact of creation in the image of God and the possibility of being loved by God, as an indestructible divine seal, and therefore of relating to Creator. The immediate consequence is the capacity to engage in relationships with one's neighbors since it is impossible to picture a divine love that does not unite people with one another. There can be no authentic relationships without a profound dialogue between people. "it is only through dialogue that we become true subjects and share a personal existence."[27]

## Kenosis and relationship

The theme of kenosis – which goes back to Philippians 2:7 – has generated a considerable amount of exegetical, theological, and polemical material throughout the two millennia of Christianity, but these avatars are not the subject of this article. Although there have been various theories and approaches in doctrine's

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[23] Stăniloae, *Chipul nemuritor*, 55.
[24] Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *The True Worth of a Man*, sermon delivered at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin (Oxford, October 22, 1967),
http://www.mitras.ru/eng/eng_03.htm, accessed July 10, 2021.
[25] Tournier, *Personajul și persoana*, 179.
[26] Tournier, *Personajul și persoana*, 178.
[27] McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, 22-23.

history, there is an essential kenotic strand (strongly emphasized by Russian thought, but also by patristic sources to which neo-patristic thinkers have referred) in twentieth-century Orthodox theology.[28] We will select our interlocutors from this line of thought for the present discussion. It is important to note that the various conceptions of kenosis have never remained strictly in the realm of theological reflection, but they also had various consequences in the sphere of spirituality.[29] Anthropology or on relations between theology and other disciplines. At the same time, one could argue that the kenosis of Christ has implications for humanity in general and for Christians in particular.

Although, when regarded from the outside, Eastern Orthodox perspectives on kenosis might seem relatively homogeneous, considering the genuine commitment of these theologians to remain faithful to the patristic tradition, even though they display a specific diversity, with at least two broad strands – which also find their correspondence in patristic thought: Those who consider that the act of kenosis consists in "the humility of the Logos who assumes human nature"; and those who, starting from the etymology of the term, talk about a quick emptying or shrinking of the glory of the Son. These differences in understanding suggest that the "mystery of the kenosis" is not only challenging to circumscribe theoretically but remains a topic open to investigation.[30] This fact is illustrated especially by Sergei Bulgakov's bold kenotic theology, which generated extremely vehement reactions in his days and continues to be a source of debate.[31] We believe that these preliminary considerations (which are little more than a sketch) are nevertheless sufficient for a minimal introduction to the subject since a more detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

For furthering the discussion, I have chosen as a point of reference the perspective of the Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, who considers that "[k]enosis consists precisely in the appropriation of our nature [i.e., human nature with its weaknesses] in all its pure bearing of sorrows by God the God-Word" and that it expresses "the relationship of intimacy between the divine hypostasis and human nature," implying a "restraint of Christ from manifesting

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[28] For a panoramic view, see Florin Toader Tomoioagă's work, *Taina chenozei în teologia ortodoxă a secolului al XX-lea* (Iaşi, Doxologia, 2015). The book is based on the author's doctoral research.

[29] One such example is "Russian kenoticism," an ascetic current which, exaggerating the humiliation of the Son in the fact of the incarnation, promoted a spirituality based on the annihilation of personality" (article "Kenoza," in Ion Bria, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă A-Z* [ed. a II-a, București, Editura IBMBOR, 1994], 231). Cf. and Tomoioagă, *Taina chenozei*, 180-184.

[30] Cf. Tomoioagă, *Taina chenozei*, 99-102. The author states that some Orthodox conceptions of kenosis could be placed in the area of theological opinion or teologumena rather than dogma (102).

[31] Vladimir Lossky's reaction is recorded by Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Gavrilyuk, "The Kenotic Theology of Sergius Bulgakov," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 58, no. 03 (August 2005), 265-267. Cf. and Tomoioagă, *Taina chenozei*, especially 185-203.

all divine power through the body in order not to annul it," his divine nature remaining unchanged.[32] The kenosis presupposes two successive "acts": the assumption of human nature by God the Son followed by the obedience of Jesus Christ as a man to God, which leads him to take upon our limitations, suffering, and, finally, death itself.[33]

Glancing ahead a little, one of the effects of kenosis, of particular interest here, is that of "abolishing from human nature the selfish disorders of anger and lust, of teaching it humility, gentleness, and tenderness through which harmony, respect, and *communicativeness* between people can be restored."[34] In other words, the balanced relations and the dialogue among people are indisputably affected by Christ's kenosis, which makes it possible – not only in a theoretical manner, or just for his human nature, but also concretely, for each one of us – to overcome the effects of sin. Moreover, in this case, the person of Jesus Christ functions not only as a role model to imitate but also as the very foundation for our possibility to engage in this action. From image to likeness, one cannot progress without the redemption accomplished by Christ.

Therefore here we find the grounds for the "kenosis after kenosis" (how it is termed in theological literature) that "translates... our participation in the kenosis of Christ, which is the only way to the Kingdom."[35] However, the various consequences of kenosis are not always explored in greater depth and detail for the individual existence of believers. For example, the entire mission of the Church in the world can be understood, from a particular perspective, as a historical kenosis.[36] How this communal kenosis becomes effective in the personal existence of each individual Christian is still to be discovered and studied in depth. However, we can already see that the relationships – and the dialogue they imply – have significant kenotic features.

Summing up the elements of the previews discussion, it can be stated that relationship and dialogue are inherent to the human being by virtue of the divine image. On the other hand, this image is fully manifested in Christ so that he also becomes *the locus* where we contemplate what our integral humanity entails. Nevertheless, the incarnate word chose kenosis as the way to assume human nature. Consequently, the man Jesus Christ appears to us as the kenotic

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[32] Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, (ed. a II-a, vol. II, Bucureşti, Editura IBMBOR, 1997), 46, 47, 50, 51.

[33] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. II, 48.

[34] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. II, 51 (s.n.).

[35] Tomoioagă, *Taina chenozei*, 142-145.

[36] Holy Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, available at http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx, accessed July 21, 2021.

presence of the Godhead. However, this kenosis impressed a mark on his humanity and consequently on our humanity. This means that both our relational capacity and the continuous dialogue we are engaged in by the way we have been created are inevitably kenotic insofar as we identify with Christ, and we long to grow in the likeness of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the following, the kenotic dialogue will be considered.

## The kenotic dialogue

In the famous prologue of the Gospel according to John, the meaning of the Logos undoubtedly implies a discursive-dialogical dimension, even if it is not limited to it.[37] In other words, the Logos can indicate more but no less than an invitation to dialogue addressed by God to humans. Moreover, this "more" means that revelation is transformative; that is, the Son who revealed the Father for us came to transform us according to his image.[38] The implication is that the incarnation itself has a subsistent dialogical dimension with a specific flavor: it is a dialogue that changes human beings. "Because God's communication takes dialogical form, it should be conceived of in terms of grace"[39] – grace that opens us up to the possibility of coming closer to God and restructuring our relationships with others.

On the other hand, if we accept this kenotic paradigm as presented above, we cannot speak about incarnation and ignore kenosis, which is, in fact, *the how* of incarnation. There is no way to know God better than in Christ, and we know the Son in no other way than through the kenosis that he assumes and lives out as man. By way of kenosis, the word became flesh, and, in this way, he made himself intelligible to us, being "fully open to others, giving them the same power by sharing in his flesh."[40] Because of that, human beings share the possibility of genuinely opening themselves to their neighbors in a dialogue in which we are able to listen and understand. Moreover, as Stăniloae argues, the kenosis of the Son is dialectical, which means that our inability to understand Christ's kenosis deepens it.[41] Even if this deepening would mean that the incarnated word is taking upon himself the confusion of humans, incapable of grasping the presence of God or, even worse, of considering it a false claim – which actually was the case as we know from the Gospels – Jesus' refusal to impose himself by

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[37] See the discussion of Jewish, Greek and Gnostic influences in John's sense of "Logos" in Dan Tomuleţ, *Revelaţie şi transformare. O interpretare a Evangheliei după Ioan* (vol. 1, Bucureşti, Eikon, 2019), 22-26.

[38] Tomuleţ, *Revelaţie*, vol. 1, 86-90.

[39] McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, 19.

[40] Stăniloae, *Teologie dogmatică*, vol. 2, 67.

[41] Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea*, 183-187.

force of argument or by a permanent display of power can be seen as a kenotic response. It is a response that – by deepening the kenosis itself – it emphasizes, in fact, God's power manifested in the very form of human weakness. At this level, the dialectic of kenosis is revealed in the dialogue of the incarnate Son with the world. Furthermore, his example could suggest similar dialectics for the Christian's dialogue with the world.

The language itself is restored through the kenosis of Christ, for in him, our words recapture their "unifying communicative function."[42] The Scripture mentions several times and in various forms that no one spoke with Jesus' authority (Matthew 7:28-29, Mark 4:41) or that he had the words of eternal life (John 6:68), a fact noted by those who met him and heard him speak. He also sometimes uses the word in a way that mirrors the moment of creation: God spoke, and things came into being; when Christ speaks, he saves, heals, sets free – thus confirming his very mission. It seems, however, that Jesus also used the language to hide (Matthew 13:10-17) or in a manner that only a few would understand, which is why he used parables. The gap between the words of the word and people's limited ability to understand – even the apostles encountered difficulties in understanding him and did not believe all that Christ said, a fact evident after his death – may be indicative of what has been lost in terms of communication and language for human nature affected by sin and the consequences of the fall. At the same time, it may signal what can be recovered when a person benefits from the restoration of the connection with God through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The need for dialogue is clear, but it remains to be seen what kind of dialogue can be shaped by Jesus' model for the Christian presence in today's world.

### *Dialogue with God*

If the implicit inner dialogue of any human being (regardless of one's beliefs) with God could be placed in the sphere of axioms that we hold as part of a particular worldview, there is nevertheless an explicit and assumed form of prayer as an active human dialogue with the Creator. In prayer – where we are not only speaking but also waiting for God to answer – we can experience God's answer as well as God's silence or absence, argues Anthony Bloom, but our experience is not of a similar kind to the abandonment experienced by Jesus Christ on the cross.[43] However, even if God would respond promptly and

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[42] Tomoioagă, *Taina chenozei*, 92.

[43] The absence could reflect one of the following: "1) sin as an obstacle to encountering God, 2) an opportunity for spiritual growth, and 3) a false vision of oneself". Cf. Roman Rytsar, *The Kenotic Theology of Anthony Bloom Metropolitan of Sourozh (1914-2003), in Anthropological Perspective*, Ph.D. diss (Ottawa, Canada, 2012), 334. A brief explanation is in order here: since not all of his works are available in English, the citation of Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan of Sourozh, was

predictably, on our part, it would still be needed a deliberate kenotic exercise of self-denial in order to hear God.[44] In fact, silent (contemplative) prayer can be seen as a spiritual extension of Christ's kenosis, and it involves the manifestation of our willingness to allow ourselves to be transformed by the adventure of encountering God. Along with uttering their prayers before God, by being silent human beings "make room" for God to answer and manifest himself according to his strong will. It is a freely assumed process that presupposes discipline and risk (resulting in the form of asceticism), a process that human beings do not try to manipulate God but make themselves willingly vulnerable before a free and loving personal God.[45]

Even if we admit that this type of dialogue is one that implies a kenosis of humans, it should be noted that we are using merely an analogy when we apply the same term to the Son and to the creature. The kenosis of the perfect one – who, even after the incarnation, remained without sin – cannot be identical to the kenosis of those affected by the fall. For us, kenosis is upward; it elevates us to God, strips us from what is harmful, and fills us with what is beneficial. On the other hand, in Orthodox theology, *the* divine *kenosis* is mirrored by the human *theosis*,[46] God descended to us so that we can ascend to him to overcome our condition affected by sin and its consequences. This being so, our dialogical kenosis is not primarily about being understood and making ourselves known, but rather (though not exclusively, for dialogue implies exchange and reciprocity) about understanding and discovering the otherness of the one who reveals himself to us – whether God or neighbor.

### *The dialogue with our peers*

The vertical dialogue of prayer, insofar as it is honest, is poured out over our relationships with others, with those who can be drawn into the conversation with God first of all through intercessory prayer for them. Out of prayer also stems "the courage to raise a prophetic voice"[47] – legitimate when it speaks on behalf of those who need their voice to be heard. In a paper about Christian responsibility, Stăniloae describes it as mediated by word, prayer, and dialogue in an interconnection that is based upon the humans' mutual recognition of personal existence in obedience to God.[48] Dialogue is an innate feature of the

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sometimes mediated by the translations of Roman Rytsar, who dedicated his doctoral research to the theology of Anthony and who also used material available only in Russian.

[44] Rytsar, *The Kenotic Theology*, 342-343.

[45] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 34-36. The author speaks of the "defenseless prayer of silent waiting on God."

[46] Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică*, vol. 2, 39.

[47] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 35.

[48] Dumitru Stăniloae, "Responsabilitatea creştină", în *Ortodoxia*, nr. 2 (1970), 181-191.

person and also a responsibility to be taken and carefully managed by the believer by virtue of the respect that the humanity of the other, as an equal bearer of the divine image, demands. To recognize the image of God in another means, in this key, to extend to him or her the invitation to personal dialogue that God addressed to the creature from the very beginning. The human person is not the initiator but just a mediator of this dialogue, and in so far as he or she lives out the faith in God, he/she closes a circle when the divine offer to engage in a dialogue is expressed not only in terms of a need for a pious individual response (which has its significant role) but above all in terms of openness to communicate with everyone, thus nurturing the hope of reconciling all humanity and all creation with the Creator. It is interesting, however, that "again and again man brings about, instead of realization, a reflection to him who reveals: he wishes to concern himself with God instead of with the world. Only, in such reflection, he is no longer confronted by a *Thou*, he can do nothing but establish an It-God in the realm of things, believe that he knows God as of an *It*, an so speak about Him." [49] Man must therefore resist the temptation to picture himself as an individualist in his dialogical relationship with God and to reduce the goal of existence to a vertical relationship with the Unseen One, which renders irrelevant relations with his neighbor, who appears to us as a strange and problematic other.

The transformative exercise learned in the dynamics of speech and silence, to which the dialectic of Christ's kenosis is added as a model to follow, can be used for a dialectical and kenotic dialogue with other members of society. In both cases, silence is a self-imposed discipline out of respect for God in one case and for the bearers of his image in the other. As a motivation, we can appeal to the desire to understand instead of fighting back; it can be a strategic silence that allows for a more appropriate and complex response that aims for a higher level of understanding. There is a need for presence and distance, where the presence can mean "public engagement or social responsibility," and distance can be the form of the "critical faithfulness to Scripture and Christian tradition." Following in the footsteps of Jacques Ellul, the dialectical approach can become a form of handling reality, especially when confronted with opposing points of view or when tension needs to be loosened up. The silence that allows the opposing side to be heard and its objections to be taken seriously can even be a way forward for the believing community's relationship with secular society. [50]

Returning to Martin Buber and his relational perspective, this can be taken as a benchmark that can be accepted even by those who do not share the Christian worldview with regard to the inherently relational nature of the human

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[49] Buber, *I and Thou*, 115.
[50] The ideas in this paragraph are based on David J. Neville's article, "Dialectic as Method in Public Theology: Recalling Jacques Ellul," in *International Journal of Public Theology* 2 (2008), 163-181. The quoted excerpts are on 175.

person. In his terms, the truth is that "without *It,* man cannot live. Nevertheless, he who lives with *it* alone is not a man."[51]

It is within this relational framework that Buber will subsequently set the problem of dialogue, which he will also explore as "silence that communicates."[52] However, for Buber, the dialogue was critical not only for the actual fulfillment of any relationship but also from the perspective of relating to the truth, for there is in us the need to see the truth. Moreover, in this quest, we are stimulated, enriched, and confirmed by the interaction of others with truth.[53]

For the purposes of this article, filtering the topic through Martin Buber's perspective was not a stringent necessity, as long as it did not alter the course of the argument in any significant way. Nevertheless, this tentative circling around the Jewish philosopher's thought opens a window to a contribution from outside the Christian environment that illustrates how truth can be viewed from many angles and, at the same time, opens the discussion toward a perspective that exceeds the theological paradigm and reaches a philosophical one. Moreover, the fact that Buber is a dialogue partner for several of the authors quoted (Stăniloae, Tournier, or McFadyen) may be an example of interaction with interlocutors from other faith traditions and from other spheres of knowledge, of dialogue which, although it is carried out in the intellectual realm, could be taken as a model of good practice in other fields.

If in the dialogue with God, the specifically kenotic nuance is given by a confident attitude of the heart in prayer, in which a person makes room for God, in the dialogue with one's neighbor, this kenotic mark can have many faces. We could begin with a non-ostentatious style of communication, one deeply rooted in the richness of Christian tradition and sensible to some basic longings of every human being. Then, a confident Christlike presence, in which any conversation partner can see the divine love and life of God displayed in the Christian speaker's being. Programmatic and strategic silence, accompanied by the refusal of aggressive and vindictive reactions, could facilitate a more effective dialogical practice with greater chances for genuine reconciliation. Likewise, lamenting the relational and conversational disorder generated by the fall and its consequent inabilities stands out as a possible hallmark of a kenotic start of a dialogue. If fellow human beings are bearers of the divine image and participants – however inactive – in dialogue with God, then a kenotic human interaction cannot objectify them, but, on the contrary, it has the potential to energize their personal dimension, to push them

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[51] Buber, *I and Thou*, 60.

[52] It is the very subtitle of a section of Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London & New York, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, ebook).

[53] Cf. Martin Buber, *Distance, and Relation*, in Asher D. Biemann, ed., *The Martin Buber Reader. Essential Writings* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 211.

away from individualism. However, the same respect for the divine image is implied in framing any dialogue around the truth while keeping clear in our minds the conviction that we do not possess and understand it in its fulness, and we will always share a perspective of it. Finally, as we have seen, dialogue also involves the risk of personal transformation. Moreover, if Christ freely and lovingly chose kenoticism, respecting people's freedom and loving even those who wanted. In that case, our kenotic dialogue with the world implies *de facto* the acknowledgment of the freedom of those who do not share the same perspective or even reject it (no matter how valid it may be in our eyes), and this reality should not impinge on our love for the other.

### Conclusions

As one can observe, the entire approach depends on the centrality of Jesus Christ when we define the image of God in human beings and the consequences of this centrality for our relational-dialogical anthropology. Since, from an Eastern Orthodox theological perspective, kenosis cannot be separated from the incarnation, everything that the incarnation of the Son brings to us as a benefit takes on this kenotic imprint. Furthermore, if one of the essential elements of the divine image is revealed in our relational capacity, the redemption of humanity is materialized in the restoration of our relational ability. Dialogue is at the heart of reality with God and one another.

The kenotic dialogue presupposes a dynamic that follows the example of Jesus Christ, not only as a simple imitation game but also relying on it as an innate structure of our Christian identity. Reconciliation mediated by Christ allows us to emerge from individualism (but also from gregariousness) towards authentic communion and genuine dialogue in which consensus is not the ultimate goal. However, truth is wrapped up in the charitable cote of love for one's fellow human beings and the encounter with the other in his or her reality as a person, everything nourished by the hope of the redemption of all humanity and all creation.

Without claiming to be the only legitimate way for the Christian to dialogue with others, the kenotic dialogue unquestionably imposes a particular way of interacting with the other. Furthermore, the potential of such a dialogue is worth capitalizing on, as long as it is based on an analogy intimately linked to how God revealed himself to us as man and the immediate consequences of this revelation for our humanity.

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