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Theology between Discourse and Experience and between Speech and Feeling

Abstract

Die Orthodoxe Theologie charakterisiert sich durch eine innere Einheit zwischen der spirituellen Erfahrung und dem Glauben, zwischen *lex orandi* und *lex credendi*. In diesem Aufsatz wird die authentische Theologie als liturgische und asketische Erfahrung dargestellt, die von der Begegnung mit Gott belebt und getragen wird.

Keywords

Theology, Spirituality, Experience,
Spiritual Knowledge, Mystics

*If you are a theologian (if you are
interested in contemplation), pray
truly and if you pray truly, you are a
theologian.*

(Evagrius the Solitary)

“Theology” means both in the
theological, technical language and in
the profane one, the whole knowledge



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about God and the “religious or theological science” which approaches and deals with the problem of the existence of God and His relationship with the world created by Him and with the man - the best of His “creation” on the one hand, and on the other hand, the institutional setting on which this knowledge and profound religious and theological study is achieved.

However this approach to theology seems to be somehow different from the spirit of the great spiritual Fathers of orthodox spirituality who meant by theology not talking about God, but talking with Him, the dialogue with Him achieved during a state of prayer. It is not an elaborate discourse about Him, but His call to a sincere and pure dialogue held with sincerity in the inside world. A dialogue achieved after a pure, focused prayer, which arises from purity and love.

According to Evagrius the Solitary, theology is an existential state, a direct connection with the Heavenly Father. Starting from this Christian hermit a practical definition of theology and of the theologian has been imposed in the eastern spirituality: “If you are a theologian (if you do contemplation), pray truly and if you pray truly, you are a theologian”, owing to such a way of understanding theology, in the orthodox spirituality. Among many religious personalities who adorn the saints’ lives, the prologues, or the calendars, only three Holy Fathers got the name of “theologian” and this is owing to the high level of their learning and spiritual life: St. John the Evangelist or the Theologian, St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Symeon the New Theologian, who was also considered the greatest mystic of the Christian Middle Ages.

For the Hermit Fathers, „theology” derives from understanding the Sacraments, from contemplating the spiritual world, from living deeply and experiencing directly the existence and the work of God in the world and in our souls. It is not a discourse, no matter how high it could be, an exposition or even an apology, but a real dynamic and direct experience, the discovery of God’s kingdom from the “depth” of our heart and from living, in the splendor of this presence. That’s why the true

theologian is not the one who talks about God, no matter how well-informed and poetical he may be, but the one who first has purified his life in order to be able to get to spiritual height, the one who has purified his body and soul, his mind through prayer, the one who has opened his soul in order to be able to work with God Who is present in the depth of the mind - the heart, since the very moment of Christening.

We could state that a true "theologian" is not the one who reveals abstract thoughts about God, but the one who discovers Christ Who lives silently inside his pure soul and makes this divine presence flourish, by accomplishing, with effort, the Christian virtues which make us resemble Him.

It is not the one who explains to the others about God, without living in His Spirit, the theologian is the one who truly believes in His presence and who makes this presence real and noticeable through the way he lives that makes Christ transparent in his words, gestures and daily deeds. From this view point, it is obvious that the perception of the existence and the presence of God is not a theoretical and speculative problem, but one of devotion and experience, essentially connected with contemplation and prayer.

For these Holy Fathers, talking about God, the One with whom the hermit talked first, before sharing with the others some parts of the great mystery, it is a grace, a gift from the Holy Spirit and it is suitable not exactly to the most intelligent ones, but to the pure and faithful souls.

Talking about God means, first of all, getting purified, having in view the meeting and union with Him. The Holy Fathers talk seldom and little about God - the greatest Mystery of the world and life but they live completely through Christ. They completely follow His language in which they express the highest experiences of the Christian life - meeting God in a complete union with Him. This union and talk with God happens in the most secret place of our soul in a state of prayer and in the abyss of humility, in love and light.

Thus theology in the experimental and existential language of the Eastern Fathers, means to be aware of the presence and work of God in the world and life, to become pure and to evolve towards the union with Him that is not achieved by discourse or talking about Him, but with Him as supreme and ultimate reality of our lives.

The Grace of Spiritual Knowledge

For the Eastern Fathers, knowing God is a gift and grace given to those who have become free from their passions and have proved to be virtuous along their lives. The Eastern Spirituality talks about the gift and grace of knowing God as being a special state of grace achieved only through pure, continuous prayer. In this state, according to Calist the Catafygiot, the ones perfected through grace or work, “live with God and the divine, the same way as they do in everyday life and they got to know the divine the same way as God contemplates those who have reached Him and He unites with them.”¹

To know God has a positive, creative and at the same time, progressive character that “develops in connection with our ascetic efforts, which lead to the achievement of a passion free state. The knowledge of the spiritual does not have a simple, rational aspect, but an ascetic perspective. Without ascetic effort, which confers freedom from passion and without experiencing Christian virtues, there is no real knowledge. At the spiritual level, the problem or the essential condition of clear spiritual knowledge does not only mean to become free from passions, but also to reach humility and repentance.

This way, we can really know ourselves. We try to improve and change our way of living. Humility and repentance help us get

¹ Calist Catafygiotul, *Despre unirea dumnezeiască și viața contemplativă, în Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, volumul VIII, traducere, introducere și note de Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, București, 1979, p. 520.

inside our soul, discover the Inside World and become better through our knowledge and deeds. The more we know about God and the deeper we perceive the infinite mystery of God, the more humble we get, being aware of our impossibility to understand infinity. That's why real knowledge leads to real humility; the same way humility is the expression of deep interior inside knowledge.

Paradoxically, real knowledge becomes an opportunity to get to real and continuous humility. The deeper the believer gets into the knowledge of God, the more he realizes how little he knows, by living into the depth or abyss of humility. This is the spiritual or redeeming lack of knowledge, the unspoken theology, the lack of knowledge that leads to self-improvement.

St. Petru from Damascus says that a lot of knowledge proves at the same time that we do not know much. St. Symeon the New Theologian shows that getting deeper into knowing God becomes an opportunity and reason not to know anything else, even God Himself. Knowing God has permanently preserved a paradoxical nature. The deeper the believer gets into the knowledge of the work of God, the better he understands His unreachable mystery. The spiritual Fathers of *Philokalia* talk, referring to this level of purity, about „the holy knowledge” or about the gift of knowledge, thinking about its connection to prayer.

The purification from passions, the liberation from sin, and the work of virtues constitute the fundamental feature and condition of each form of spiritual knowledge. “The one who looks for the meaning of the Commandments, without obeying them”, says St. Gregory Palamas, “wanting to learn them through studying and reading is like somebody who takes the shadow for the truth. Because the meaning of the truth is given to those who live in truth. And those who do not live in truth

and who are not integrated in it, looking for its meanings, get to the maddened wisdom”².

It is right to say that the spiritual truth cannot be noticed or lived as truth, without living a pure life. The purity of the soul enlightens the mind and enlarges the power of perception and understanding. Christian life is centered round virtues, that is why to live literally, means to live on this infinite horizon of the Christian virtues. Each new connotation of the worked virtues also makes our knowledge deeper in realization and understanding. The further we get into the work of virtues the deeper becomes our knowledge of the world and of God. And the true awareness through understanding leads to the union with God, belongs to the saints, meaning the ones who got completely purified from passions and perfected their virtues. This way our consciousness is the measure of our lives: we depend on sin or on our liberation from it. The words of St. Symeon the New Theologian have to be understood in such a context. According to the saint, Christ appears to those who show their love for Him respecting His commandments or that the measure of sharing the heavenly grace with the saints and their perfection is related to the intensity of our ascetic efforts.

The bodily, interior and spiritual knowledge reaches its aim - the union of the contemplator with God - only by pure, focused and continuous prayer. Spiritual knowledge is according to St. Gregory Palamas “intellectual and spiritual sensitivity”³, union not consciousness. It represents the ignorance that is superior to any consciousness. It comes from the pure heart, through the experience of prayer. The meaning that St. Gregory Palamas assigns to this spiritual knowledge, is that of the union with God of the communion of God, of silently knowing Him by pure prayer. Knowing God as experience has the meaning of

² St. Gregory of Sinai, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VII, p. 98.

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Scripta Publishing House, 1991, p. 190.

communion with God achieved through Heavenly grace in a mystical, hidden way after getting over every low impression or after ceasing the activity of the mind⁴. The supreme way of perceiving God, is equivalent to a feeling of mystery which cannot leave out reason and feeling, but it is deeper than these ones⁵.

The gift of the grace of consciousness is a gift of pure prayer as St. Diadochos of Photiki says, "because consciousness is achieved by prayer and deep quietness when the concerns disappear completely"⁶. Similarly, Calist the Patriarch says that "contemplative live" (life of watching) is lived together and in continuous friendship with the holy prayer. And both of them are the most graceful and heavenly children of the soul⁷.

Pure prayer is the sincere dialogue between the humble mind and God. It is the dialogue between the man and his Creator, dialogue that takes place on the spiritual skyline of the pure love. Nowhere else does man know himself and God better than in prayer. During a praying state, the believer lives at the most intense level, his relationship with God his dependency on his Creator. And it is also in prayer that he discovers his meaning in eternity through spiritual self-knowledge. Knowing himself, man gets further, according to the measure of his spiritual effort to know his Father.

Prayer, as an existential dialogue with God, means to know God as ultimate, supreme reality. Dynamism or the work of knowing God is in its inside sphere, the effect of prayer, because only through prayer transcendental reality can be realized and experienced. Knowing God at the highest level is prepared in prayer, but it is beyond it. Then, mind ceases its usual work, getting to a heavenly state when God takes the believer away

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Idem, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, tome 1, București, 1978, p. 139.

⁶ Diadochos of Photiki, *Cuvânt ascetic în 100 de capete*, in *Filocalia...*, tome 1, pp. 416-417.

⁷ Calist the Patriarch, *Capete care au lipsit*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VIII, p. 253.

and then prayer ceases. Then the mind gets deeply into the uncommon, intelligible things and coexists with God⁸. At this level of prayer, lived or existentially experienced, mind achieves some superior knowledge, it achieves the feeling of God's mystery, as much as it is revealed. Prayer and knowledge strengthen each other, they need each other. Both in knowledge and especially in prayer, the believer lives his connection with God in a paradoxical way through profoundness and simplicity at the same time.

Thus, the attitude of theology and orthodox spirituality as far as knowing God is concerned, is existential involving man completely with his entire self and this happens because "theology has to be less than positive knowledge regarding the heavenly being, but an experience of what is superior to all understanding"⁹ because the way of knowing God is necessarily a means of getting to Him.

The Talk or Speech about God - Discourse or Dialogue?

According to St. Antony the Great, the word has a special spiritual significance, because says the same Father, "people honour the word more than anything else. So powerful the word is, that through it through gratitude we serve God and by using dishonourable words or words that sound bad, we damn our soul"¹⁰.

The word is the "servant of mind" because by means of words, man expresses or hides his inner living. That's why at the Final Judgment, all our words will be shown and we shall have to be judged for all the words we have said and for the consequences

⁸ Hieromonk Antonie Plămădeală, *Rugăciune și cunoaștere în teologia ortodoxă*, in „Studii Teologice”, X (1958), no. 3-4, p. 221.

⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, translation, introductory study and notes by Pr. Vasile Răducă, Anastasia Publishing House, s.a., p. 67.

¹⁰ St. Anthony the Great, *Învățăături despre viața monahală*, in *Filocalia...*, tome I, p. 31.

they had in the souls and lives of our fellow - beings. The word, this expression of the thought may appear, according to the same Father, in learning, reading, deed and grace¹¹. The word of reading and learning, in order to become vivid and efficient has to be verified and reinforced through deeds of virtue. And very often where God sees this, He gives grace to the word and speech.

Different according to its origin, the word is also different by its meanings and effects. St. Diadochos of Photiki talks about “the word of worldly wisdom”¹² and about the spiritual word. The former is an “invention of the people who love fame” and it brings no joy or comfort to the soul and mind, but only the desire for fame and praise. The spiritual word, however “preserves the soul of the one who talks without thinking about vain fame”¹³. It comforts all the parts of the soul guards the thinking without falls and illusions, turning it into love.

Superior to the spiritual word is the “heavenly word”¹⁴. This one comes from the Heavenly Word and is given as a special gift to the ones who can see, as the knowledge beyond human mind. It is the effect of living in virtue and God’s love for His creation¹⁵. This warms the knowing mind and the mind that speaks about God revealing important and terrifying mysteries. According to the words they utter and according to the experience they share through them, speakers are divided into: demagogues, orators, true philosophers, heavenly philosophers and heavenly speakers.

¹¹ St. Gregory of Sinai, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VII, p. 122.

¹² St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Cuvânt ascetic în 100 de capete*, in *Filocalia...*, tome 1, p. 417.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Answers to Talasie*, in *Filocalia...*, tome III, p. 27.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

The demagogue speaks about lofty experiences, but by the way he lives he treads underfoot all of them. Everything within him is a lie which sooner or later will be discovered,

The orator “summarizes thing through general knowledge and makes the difference and unites the elements like the parts of a body showing them equal in importance according to their difference and unity”¹⁶. Oratory means argumentation and demonstration and its content does not always consist of the spiritual and the heavenly. It has the features of science and art while heavenly discovery means living and seeing the mystery, in amazement.

The philosopher is the one who “knows the reasons of human beings for their deeds or who starting from the cause of human beings’ deeds gets to know them”¹⁷. If he is a believer he gets to a higher understanding, inside them, of the realities that appear from the angle of his thinking, If his learning is lived through the deeds dictated by his faith, through the results of his spiritual work he reaches “the understanding and happiness given by God”¹⁸. “He loves and looks for the wisdom that allows him to build God here, as an ultimate echo, but he does not take pride in doing this in order to be praised and to get fame in this world, he does not love the material side of it, but he loves God’s wisdom shown in its nature and movement”¹⁹. This one is really “God’s friend”²⁰ and he has reached the level of moral, natural and theological knowledge being aware of the initial and essential reasons of things and through them, he rises towards their supreme reason.

The Heavenly speaker is the one who “makes the difference between the things that exist either created or not and those

¹⁶ St. Gregory of Sinai, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VII, p. 146.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

that do not exist and he points out the reasons of the latter. And he does this through heavenly inspiration; and the world which is known and seen as the world perceived by the senses and which appears from the unseen one whose perception does not depend on the senses, considering the seen world the face of the unseen one and the unseen world the archetype of the seen one²¹.

The Philokalic Fathers show us the difference between the written words which are not sentenced or scorned²², talking about the circumstances in which our writing do not bring about punishment because we do not teach the others things that we do not respect ourselves, but on the contrary it gives us spiritual results and Heavenly reward.

The punishment for his words will be given to the one who “writes about virtues in order to be admired, to be noticed and to get fame”²³. His words will be of no use and he will not be able to enlighten the others and in the world to be, “he will be punished because he sold God’s word in the market in order to get pleasure from people in a sly way.

The true theological reasons which can lead us to talking and writing about the spiritual are:

1. Remembering and reminding our fellow - beings about our existence and responsibility towards these realities.
2. The benefit of the others.
3. Humility.

So, the ascetic Fathers talk about several kinds of words and their manifestation, but as a whole they refer to the difference between the barren word and the word that brings peace and quiet, light and joy; to the difference between demagogy or hypocrisy and the direct experience of what we talk about.

When they are the expression of learning or theoretical knowledge, when they do not describe and do not convey the

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 155.

²³ *Ibidem*.

richness of our spiritual living but they show our pride, these words are barren, powerless and shallow. As they do not come out of the depth of our being, they do not enter in reaching the depth of other people's souls, but they are most often means of communicating experiences that can enrich the mind or reason with new ideas and knowledge without being able to lead the souls to a better spiritual life.

Such a man is double - faced and demagogic. He lies by his own way of living, by his deeds - that betray him. Everything he does is a lie and increases his moral badness. According to Avva Dorotheos, such a man is "doubled". His life is worth despising and laughing at. Even the words that he utters are not true, they are not what they seem only because they are well arranged. As one who has not got used to spiritual knowledge he "utters words without being aware of their meaning, not being able to use them right"²⁴.

He talks about lofty things through his sinful mind, he gives spiritual advice although he has not liberated himself from his passions. That is why, what he sees is not the truth and the way he sees is not the true one and his blindness brings about the lack of meaning of everything he refers to. The false science that he teaches is the expression of his vain fame and he gets the scorn of the scorn of the devils and the pity of the people.

His knowledge is "hesitating, transient and bad"²⁵, his words are external and they touch and influence only the outside. So he lives in terrible mistake²⁶. "The power of living that leads to the enlightenment of the Spirit and the everlastingly resourceful and inspiring work of God"²⁷ do not exist in him, neither does "the understanding union"²⁸, but the weakness

²⁴ St. Gregory of Sinai, *Capete foarte folositoare în acrostih*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VII, p. 195.

²⁵ Calist the Catafygiot, *Despre unirea dumnezeiască și viața contemplativă*, în *Filocalia...*, tome VIII, p. 512.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

and instability, the darkness and appearance, the recklessness and error²⁹ and that is why his discourse expresses the incoherence of this soul.

The one who talks from reading and not from living, from indirect knowledge and not from direct experience, “strays from a place to another, carrying tools without knowing how to use them and makes promises, according to what he has apparently seen, about some knowledge that he did not touch even with the tips of his fingers, being rock instead of harbour, painted tomb instead of church and wolf instead of sheep leading to the loss of those who have been deceived by his appearance”³⁰.

The clean in soul and living always utters words that are the expression of the spirit and talks in purity about the heavenly and about what there is inside him. On the other hand, one’s words can be the expression of a heart torn by passions. And even if he talks about spiritual things, he speaks with passion, in order to succeed in an unfair way.

Cleaning from Passions as Condition to get the Grace of God and of Theology

The essential condition of talking about God is moral purity. The pure one talks about God according to his spiritual experience, that is what God has shown him, as a result of his purity. His talking reveals, in a spiritual way, even things that are still imperfect, while, through his words, the sinful defiles everything he thinks or talks about. In the Philokalic Fathers writings they ask for purity in order to get prepared for theology.

“Do not talk about things that belong to the enlightened” says Calist the Patriarch, “before looking inside yourself with all your skill and before chasing away the evil. Because you will be

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

the mockery of the devils and the passions of insanity”³¹ and Teognost, who has deep knowledge of God, warns us: “May nobody deceive you, brother, that without holiness, as the God, who is beyond all purity, does not allow to be seen by the impure one”³². “That is why” he says “if you want to be worthy enough to see God, first embrace the peaceful, quiet life; and by doing this you will get to know yourself and God”³³. Or even more clearly, “if you want to become a theologian and a contemplator, go higher in living and earn by purity”³⁴. The essential criterion of our talking about God is purity and humility.

About spiritual things may talk only the one who knows them, and only, to those who know how to use them and how to get benefit out of them³⁵, not to throw pearls before those who do not know their value.

He has to utter words with fear of God and with might, after he has proved himself to be wanted and blessed by God. His word has to be “humble”. The reason is love and spiritual benefit. If they are tempted by were, curiosity of the brothers and not by their need of spiritual progress and accomplishment it is better for them to refrain from talking and thinking³⁶. “The one who talks without passion does well because he talks on behalf of God; and the one who is aware that he will talk with passion and keeps silent, does well because he has kept silent on behalf of God”³⁷, St. Basil and St. John tell us.

When we talk about spiritual things and things that we know through our own experience, we have to talk with humility and

³¹ Calist the Patriach, *Capete care au lipsit*, in *Filocalia...*, tome VIII, p. 351.

³² Teognost, *Despre lucrare, contemplație și preoție*, in *Filocalia...*, tome IV, p. 281.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 270.

³⁵ St. Varsanufios and John, *Scrieri duhovnicești*, in *Filocalia...*, tome XI, p. 619.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 518.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

fear of God³⁸ only if we are asked to get attention. And God will make us tell what is useful for our spiritual progress and the progress of our fellow - beings. To speak with humility means to point out the things we know not as ones who learn from them, but from the experience and gifts of their spiritual fathers³⁹.

We must not talk before being asked to, because this is a sign of vain glory. And when we are asked to, we have to tell what we know, with humility and fear of God, the One who judges our deeds and words. We have to use few words without getting proud if our thoughts are received and we do not have to get sad if they are not accepted⁴⁰. Our testimony has to be from the experience of the Fathers because "they talk according to God's will"⁴¹. And after we have finished telling our few words, we have to repent in front of God for our lack of merits and knowledge⁴². To talk about unexperienced things is insane⁴³.

Pure talking about God is spiritual grace. It is given to those who, "for the purity of their minds, got from God the whole grace that people can receive"⁴⁴. These ones got through efforts and through grace the power of clearly understanding the spiritual things.

According to St. Diadochos of Photiki, "all the gifts of our God are good and they can give goodness. But none of them moves and enlightens our hearts more than the grace of talking about God theology"⁴⁵. This spiritual gift is "an early result of God's

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 321.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 625.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*. 673.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 321.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 625.

⁴⁴ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, in *Filocalia...*, tome III, p. 263.

⁴⁵ St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Cuvânt ascetic în 100 de capete*, in *Filocalia...*, tome 1, pp. 445-446.

goodness"⁴⁶ and gives the one who has it, a lot of gifts. So, firstly it makes us gladly despite all the love for life, as ones who have, instead of worldly desire the indescribable richness of the words of God. Then it enlightens our mind with the fire that transforms it so that it be in communion with the helpful spirits. Because it is beautiful, all - embracing and makes all our worries, disappear, feeding our mind with God's words in a flash of indescribable light, it prepares the rational soul for the inseparable, communion with God, through the Holy Prophets, as well as among people (a miracle) to clearly sing the supremacy of God in heavenly sounds, in harmony with this divine union of the bride and her bridegroom.

Through purifying from passions better and through the work of Christian virtues, the Christian progressively gets deeper, according to the intensity of his efforts, into this spiritual knowledge, premise to theology. God, as a result of these efforts, reveals the Christian His divine mysteries better and the man, purified from pain and raised to the level of contemplation, gets the receptivity and capacity of better understanding these high experiences that enrich his life and anticipates the everlasting joy, in the Kingdom of God.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 446.