



WEAK THOUGHT AND THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT: FROM POSTMODERNISM TO APOPHATICISM

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What the post-modern philosophies have in common is the rejection of metaphysics, renouncing the modernity's meta-narrations. This refusal, stemming from the Nietzschean death of God, also brings about the refusal of Christian metaphysics, namely rejecting dogmatics, morality, churchly hierarchy etc. The present text attempts to formulate an argument and a theological solution to the post-modern challenges epitomised herein by Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought", by starting off with the various meanings of the concept of metaphysics and the opening towards the apophatic experience supposed by the dogmatic antinomies. The argument will be developed in two steps: (1) bringing to the foreground the challenge of the weak thought's nihilist Christianity; and (2) trying to answer this inconvenient challenge with the help of the Orthodox apophatic theology, going back to St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite.

Keywords: Weak thought, Christian metaphysics, Dogmatics, Apophatic theology, St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite.

THE "WEAK THOUGHT" CHRISTIANITY

Gianni Vattimo's post-metaphysical and post-modern vision is one of the most challenging because it puts forward a 'nonreligious Christianity', an expression primarily indicating a non-institutional Christianity, i.e. without the Church.¹ Criticising the metaphysical bases, suspected of constantly generating domination and of being responsible for power struggles, Vattimo bases his opinion on the existence of a legitimate hermeneutic subjectivism, which would actually originate in the very evangelical advice of finding the truth in one's own inwardness. The objective truth would thus lose its strength because it would always hide a non-objective interest, a perspective, a tradition etc., all of which are meant to ensure its success, as well as its dominance.

Faced with this reality, Christianity could no longer resort to either the truth or to stable metaphysical structures or grounds, since they could not avoid being suspected of dissimulating a will for power, in fact. No longer able to accept objective truth, Vattimo's thought chooses to refuse the Tradition's truth as well, silently homologising the objectivity of metaphysical

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demarches with “dogmatic” objectivity and rejecting them both, at the same time, because of their proximity. Dogmatics is metaphysical and that is why its death is obvious, just as the death of metaphysics.

In this perspective, even hermeneutics, in its philosophical version, as it is present in Nietzsche’s or Heidegger’s texts, namely in its most radical variants, would be the mere evolution and mature form of the Christian message. In the same argumentative order, secularisation is no longer to be regarded as a dangerous disease for Christianity but as its fulfilment. What is left of the thusly deconstructed Christianity is the love in its charitable form, whose mission is to supplant the truth: „... perhaps true Christianity must be nonreligious. In Christianity there is a fundamental commitment to freedom. And, to add a bit of scandal, by standing for freedom, this includes freedom from (the idea of) truth. After all, if there really is an objective truth, there will always be someone who is more in possession of it than I and thereby authorized to impose its law obligation on me”.²

Vattimo suggests that, as a consequence, Christianity emancipates itself from any authority and attains true freedom, one without Church, without truth, and without dogmatics.³ Proposing a Christianity without truth, *ergo* without power (as Vattimo post-metaphysically infers), surviving nihilism is paradoxically achieved precisely by transforming Christianity into nihilism, by bringing it to its fulfilment as secularisation (for Vattimo the two terms are synonymous). This interpretation of Christianity is possible due to what Vattimo calls “weak thought”, namely the post-metaphysical and post-modern thought.

Post-modern *par excellence*, weak thought has the same resistance to strong definitions as does post-modernity, following the same path opened by Nietzsche’s proclaiming the devaluation and the death of God. Describing it means firstly taking into consideration this very capacity to reject the foundations of modernity and to observe, that the philosophy born of this refusal does not, in itself, presuppose a new foundation; it rather represents a metaphor of what cannot be substantiated.⁴ All the suggestions that might help us understand it, converge in this weakening in relation to the foundations of modern metaphysics.

Weak thought⁵ takes into account the Nietzschean-Marxist discovery of the connection between the metaphysical evidence, made manifest in the necessity of a foundation, and the domination relations thus instituted.⁶ The violence of metaphysics is easily observed in history, the being can no longer be thought in a modern manner, but should also not be subjected to the equally “strong” practices of demystification/unmasking; a relaxed view on the world of appearances, discourses and symbolical forms might discover here a possible experience of the being. Such a discovery would not generate a new balance of power, for the simulacra would remain outside the reach of glorification – reclaimed by Deleuze – precisely so that it would not receive the weight the metaphysical being had previously had. The intention is not to replace one

² John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *După moartea lui Dumnezeu*, trans. Gabriel Cercel (București: Curtea Veche, 2008), 56.

³ See Gianni Vattimo, *A crede că mai credem: e cu puțință să fim creștini în afara Bisericii?*, trans. Ștefania Mincu, Biblioteca italiană (Constanța: Pontica, 2005), 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Further along we provide some traits as they appear in the description Vattimo makes in Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Gândirea slabă*, Biblioteca italiană (Constanța: Pontica, 1998), 7.

⁶ Indeed in *On the genealogy of morality*, Nietzsche states that “the ascetic priest thereby prescribes ‘love thy neighbour’, what is actually the arousal of the strongest, most life-affirming impulse albeit in the most cautious dose – the *will to power*”. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy moralei*, trans. Simion Dănilă (București: Humanitas, 1996), 419.

power structure with another one, but to try a new type of reasoning that appropriates the hermeneutical relativism, criticises modernity and the being of modern metaphysics, supports post-metaphysical nihilism and prefers the event, the instability and the metaphor to any unhistorical rationalistic universality. Due to the obvious lack of space we shall not deal with all these characteristics here; instead we will focus exclusively in the way in which the being's weakening is conceived.

With regard to its relations to being, weak thought insists on revealing the non-argumentable character of the stability traits in presence, eternity etc., conferred by metaphysical tradition. Following Heidegger's critique in *Sein und Zeit*, to whom the being cannot possess the generality character of the present-at-hand beings, weak thought takes on this "forgetting of Being" and bears the last consequences. Thus appropriating the ontological difference leads to the conclusion that "the being is not", it "happens".⁷ The being as *Ereignis* is "inscribed in its historical, metaphorical and kenotic contexts"⁸ in an advent that is never complete, never stable, never possible on the grounds of any given transcendental level.

For the Italian philosopher one of the causes of the contemporary return to God, freed from political, dogmatical dominations in his turn, is precisely this end of the metaphysics. The comeback of the religious feeling is authentic inasmuch as we accept that apart from the secular religious experience, none other is possible: "As in the forgetting of Being of which Heidegger spoke, here too (...) it is less a case of recollecting the forgotten origin by making it present again than of recollecting that we have always already forgotten it, and that the recollection of this forgetfulness and this distance constitutes the sole authentic religious experience".⁹ Consequently, Nietzsche's dead God returns in a new, weakened form after his extinction, and the weak thought theorises his return. It is time to underline the fact that the "weakness" in this phrase has nothing to do with the incapacity to reason or with a decadence phenomenon the thought would diagnose itself with; it refers to the relations this thought has with the foundations of the metaphysics, with those chief principles that, throughout time, had justified the idea of universality. Primarily, weak thought „is not the idea of a thinking that is more aware of its own limits, that abandons its claims to global and metaphysical visions, but above all a theory of weakening as the constitutive character of Being in the epoch of the end of metaphysics."¹⁰

If by the means of metaphysical categories one is no longer able to access anything in the order of the full being, than this experience of the weakening is the only one possible. The weak thought appropriates the hermeneutic identity between being and language, inherited from Heidegger, „not as a means to recover the original, the true being, which the metaphysics has forgotten due to its scientist and technological consequences; but as a way to once again encounter the being as trace, as memory, a consumed and weakened being (and therefore worthy of attention)."¹¹

We cannot overlook the fact that the inherent presuppositions this thinking sets in motion allow for no other solution: both the equivalence between being and God, and the absence of an access to the being/God outside the categories of metaphysics are criticisable and inexact.¹² In the following section I will try to argue, with the help of the apophatic theology of the Orthodox

⁷ Vattimo and Rovatti, *Gândirea slabă*, 16.

⁸ Enda McCaffrey, *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratization to Postmetaphysics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 104.

⁹ Vattimo, *A crede că mai credem*: 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Vattimo and Rovatti, *Gândirea slabă*, 7.

¹² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd edition ed. (Massachusetts/Oxford/Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 297.

Church – which necessarily brings us to St. Dionysius the Areopagite’s thought – not only that weak thought isn’t the only solution to refuse the dominance of modern metaphysics, but moreover that when issues regarding Christian Tradition are being debated, such a discussion on overcoming rational idolatry can take place even within this Tradition. In other words, the answer lays not in rejecting dogmatics – tacitly homologised to rationalist metaphysics – but in rediscovering its antinomical and iconic characteristic, one that points beyond it, toward the incomprehensible God. This way, the truth of the teachings of the faith is not denied, but its incompleteness is highlighted and a transfigured thought can be opposed to the weak one.

APOPHATIC THEOLOGY OR ON THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THINKING

In his book, *On the absence and unknowability of God*¹³, Christos Yannaras began a dialogue between the Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s nihilism and St. Dionysius the Areopagite’s apophaticism. According to Yannaras, nihilism and the theme of God’s death, as they appear in Nietzsche’s work, are a refusal to attribute God the being’s characteristics, to deem valid the operation which believes it exhausts the divinity by resorting to conceptual networks and rational formalisations.¹⁴ This refusal, quite legitimate in itself, is also present in the Tradition of the Church, and it is referred to as apophatic theology.

The incomprehensibility of divine nature is a commonplace in Eastern patristic; of God it can be postulated “only that he is, and this when (those around the being) are rightfully and righteously contemplated”.¹⁵ Without the correct contemplation involving the true faith, any remarks on God are invalid even if they do not refer to his being. A more adequate approach is to talk of God’s being in negative, rather than in positive terms, so that its mystery, in any case inaccessible to human knowledge, be preserved untouched. However, this does not mean that the kataphatic theology of affirmations is less important: although inadequate to some extent, “it does not say something contrary to God”;¹⁶ but the theology of negations reveals more, whereas the affirmations might conceal more: „So, on the other hand, what is hidden is to be manifest to us through denial, and every power of picturing what is true in shapes and riddles is rather to pass away and raise us up ineffably to the Word itself from the letter and what is apparent according to the power of the Spirit”.¹⁷

Apophatic or negation theology believes that since there are a finite number of positive names which may be given to God, negating them is the more appropriate means of knowledge. There is a limit here, which theoretical reason must accept. If about God it can be said that He is almighty, all-good, all-knowing etc. just as in Kant’s philosophy the concept of pure reason or the transcendental ideal of God state, the knowledge these designations offer is not complete. Negations provide a better way. In his small treatise *Mystical Theology*, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite writes that God is beyond all sensible things, as well as beyond all intelligible things, and that to His regard affirmative terms simply cannot be used properly. In this sense God is „... neither one, nor oneness; nor godhead, nor goodness; nor is He spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us, or to any other beings,

¹³ Christos Yannaras, *Heidegger și Areopagitul*, trans. Nicolae Șerban Tanașoca (București: Anastasia, 1996).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹⁵ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2006), 371.

¹⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, ediția a doua ed., vol. 1 (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), 81.

¹⁷ Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*: 193.

of the things that are, or the things that are not; neither does anything that is, know Him as He is; nor does He know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to Him, nor name Him, nor know Him; neither is He darkness, nor light, nor the false, nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to Him, for although we may affirm or deny the things below Him, we can neither affirm nor deny Him, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of His absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all.”¹⁸ As it may be observed, the negations in the excerpt are radical: Dionysius does not even accept paternity and filiation, or unity and trinity, and this poses the problem of an incompatibility between mystical theology and dogmatic thinking, between apophatic and kataphatic theology.

Hence the issue of the difference between the apophaticism’s absolute which goes beyond categories and the category-bound thought of the dogmata: if the dogmata operate with principles which they employ outside the rules of logic, St. Dionysius’ apophaticism is not categorial, because in this case, the categories and the concepts are present only in order to be denied, even though the mechanism functions in accordance to the rules of logic.¹⁹

Would this mean that the apophaticism suspends the dogmas, for instance the one of the Holy Trinity? Or that the apophaticism’s God gains precedence over the personal God of the Jewish-Christian tradition?

For the Fathers of the Church, the dogmata were firstly the truth of the faith. They do not represent the enclosure the Kantian terminology deems them to be, when it make use of the phrase “dogmatic philosophy” as opposed to critical philosophy; they are the reference-points of an experience that was already present within the Church, the guidelines that make sure the religious experience does not go astray towards self-affectivity, subjectivism, or towards impersonal mysticism. It is as if these formulae – which in the realm of knowledge are pure standstills and are mercilessly incriminated by the novelties brought on by philosophy – were absolutely vital parameters in that of *recognition*, which occurs during a mystical encounter. Formulae which by themselves may be accused of feigning transcendence, but which become crucial points for those who advance on the path to knowing God: having the experience of another God than the Trinity, for instance, is, in compliance with the thought of the Holy Fathers of the Church, an experience outside the faith community of the Church.

The apophatic God completes the dogmatic knowledge in a necessary manner. Without a liturgical-mystical experience, the transcendental illusion affects any dogmatic formula. For this reason, the dogma is a “enclosure opening itself” as Constantin Noica wrote.²⁰ Through this leap towards a radically different experience than that of discursive rationality, the dogmatic reason contains within itself the very overcoming which the apophatic ascension will perform, and it is due to the presence of antinomies – logically unsolvable.

For example, the positive names of God are aimed at urging towards spiritual progress. Their autonomous understanding doesn’t mean anything yet, just as understanding the dogmatic antinomies means neither having faith, nor knowing God yet. Forming a ladder, from the most sensible, to the most spiritual, these names lead toward the obscurity of mystery, because God who reveals Himself through them is much more than them. No form of objective understanding is possible: solely the attempt to find He Who is unattainable justifies the whole of the kataphatic

¹⁸ Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul, "Despre teologia mistică," in *Opere complete, Colecția cărților de seamă* (București: Paideia, 1996), 250. [Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2003). 19.]

¹⁹ Lucian Blaga, "Eonul dogmatic," in *Trilogia cunoașterii* (București: Minerva, 1983), 241-42.

²⁰ Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă* (București: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1991), 203.

theology. „These are the names of the Son. Climb up through them; divinely through the high and compassionately through the bodily things (Hebr. 5,2); or better yet fully divinely, so that you should become God by climbing up for He Who climbed down from above for us.”²¹

Alluding to apophaticism, the mystery can “save” the divine from philosophy’s conceptual pride. The impenetrability to concept makes things difficult for human reason, which either chooses to conceitedly rise above, or to diminish itself and become weak, in order to accept that for theognosis there is another way at hand. Perhaps this apophatic opening reaches its climax in the dogmatic antinomies. The affirmations of kataphatic theology point to – or should do so, as long as they do not lock themselves within conceptual idolatry – the living God, whose knowledge is to be achieved by non-theoretical experience, following the principle stipulating that “... the apophaticism is present in all the stages of spiritual ascension”.²²

Therefore, apophatic theology makes it possible to escape rationalist metaphysics because the final purpose of progressive negations is not a rational concept, but a non-objectifiable and in-cognoscible reality.²³ A rift opens up between God and being, which makes it impossible to halt within the framework of an ontological discourse. Being beyond being and essence, effectively different from the created beings, God can only be known by the means of the union which transgresses the boundaries of the mind. The divine names, such as they are read by Saint Dionysius in the Scriptures, belong to an affirmative theology that does not reach the very nature of the One Most High. Even the concept of being, central to western metaphysics, cannot be fully homologised to God, as it, in its turn, is just another divine name that both utters and hides something about Him, like all the other names that are to be surpassed through apophatic theology. The being is not God, and God is not the being, but He is above being.²⁴ Here we notice a way that went beyond onto-theology inasmuch as its categories are left behind the ascension toward God.

Consequently, reason is not deprived of its positive role although apophatic surpassing is a supra-conceptual form of knowing through not knowing occurring by the will of God and not with the power of one’s mind. Albeit the dogmata are boundaries of the faith, guidelines pointing toward the direction one should follow, they neither exhaust the knowledge of He Who is beyond knowing, nor do they try to be mere human decisions endowed with authoritative value. They are primarily testimonies of faith ensuring the continuity with the faith of the Holy Apostles, whereas the ecumenical synods “did not decide ‘on’ matters of the faith, but bore witness ‘to’ the apostolic faith”.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

It seems inappropriate to shift the discussion on the dogmas from the field of ecclesial and mystical experience to that of philosophy. Such an adventure, good though it may be for the

²¹ Sf. Grigore de Nazianz, *Cele 5 cuvântări teologice*, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae, Dogmatica (București: Anastasia, 1993), 21.

²² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetică și mistică creștină sau teologia vieții spirituale* (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 1993), 217.

²³ See Yannaras, Heidegger și Areopagitul: 86.

²⁴ See, for instance, Étienne Gilson, *Filozofia în Evul Mediu. De la începuturile patristice până la sfârșitul secolului al XIV-lea*, trans. Ileana Stănescu (București: Humanitas, 1995), 77.

²⁵ A view expressed by H.-J. Schulz, *Bekennntnis Statt Dogma. Kriterien Der Verbindlichkeit Kirchlicher Lehre*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 163 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1996), quoted in Ioan I. Ică jr, *Canonul Ortodoxiei*, vol. 1: *Canonul apostolic al primelor secole* (Sibiu: Deisis, 2008), 69.

history of thought, would not render the true meaning of the faith truths, and it is therefore necessary that our discourse once more lay emphasis on the connection between life and thought, between the teachings of the faith and experiencing God. This does not mean that life originates in concept and that a sort of intellectual love of God should ensue; but rather that the dogmata contain in their depths the warning that they are prerequisite in experiencing the divine, but also that this experience surpasses them.

With regard to weak thought and renouncing the metaphysical grounds, we have tried to show that this renouncement is present in the Tradition of the Eastern Church under the guise of surpassing: Christianity itself chooses to overcome the metaphysical foundations because it is aware they are unable to contain He Who cannot be contained, Whose mystery cannot be exhausted by any intellectual foundationism or dogmatic idolatry.

If we accept that the faith formulas offered by the seven Ecumenical Synods are the faith's very metaphysical foundations, which post-modernity refuses, we should also note that they also contain the way to be overcome. But this overcoming is radical: it is not only intellectual, even if the antinomical expressions might hint to that; the overcoming of which St. Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of in his *Apophatic theology* is simultaneously a progress toward God. Led by God to the depths He alone knows, the man surpasses the intellectual apophaticism of pure speculation, and reaches the existential apophaticism of direct and supra-conceptual experience. It is only now that the metaphysic-dogmatic bases are overcome, although they are still references without which the experience of the Church might deteriorate to mystic subjectivism. These formulae of faith are not a philosophical system, that once learned by heart ensures one's salvation. The Church's dogmata, antinomical and unacceptable for logical thinking, are openings towards experiencing He Who is "beyond everything" (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite). They invite man to take part in the Spirit's dynamics, in the loving communion of the Holy Trinity, where this adventure is not undertaken alone but it is the adventure of God himself, Who knows himself and engages the believer who fulfils the deeds of the faith in this movement of intra-trinitarian love. Naturally, this love is not the one of which the postmodernism of weak thought speaks, one without truth and guidelines; it is the love which transforms the metaphysical discourse about God in the joy of communing with Him, and the metaphysical foundations are surpassed upward, not downward... Being aware of this capacity to overcome theological rationalism, Orthodox theology can become post-metaphysical, in some way, without giving up its own Tradition or its own identity.

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