



Apophasis and System. Dogmatic Theology in Apophatic Perspective

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Abstract: The subject of the article is the nature of theological apophasis in relation to the systematic aspirations of theological reflection. This relationship is analyzed from the perspective of the three essential truths of Christianity that form the hard core of its message: the Trinity, the personal union of the two natures in Christ, and deification. Accordingly, Trinitarian theology, Christology and anthropology are characterized, each area separately and in relation to the others, by a high degree of systematization. They constitute compact, organic and interrelated theological systems which, as constituent parts, form an organic whole. All three contain significant apophatic themes. An analysis of the connection between their systematicity and their apophatic dimension allows us to draw broader and more general conclusions about apophaticism in general and its place in theological systematization.

Keywords: Trinity, Christ, Trinitarian theology, Christology, theological anthropology, deification, dogmatics, system, apophasis

Modern philosophy and theology are characterized by a revival of apophatic consciousness. In theology, this consciousness was crucial at least until the second half of the thirteenth century. Nominalism, voluntarism and then scientific tendencies made the apophatic perspective give way to the search for purely positive and certain knowledge. Today, the apophatic attitude is returning to theology. Unfortunately, it very often returns mutated by postmodern gnoseological pessimism¹ tinged with concealed or explicit atheism. In such a context, this text is an attempt to understand apophasis from its original historical Christian sources. These are especially the Trinitarian and Christological dogma, two constitutive moments of any reflection of Christian theology. They will provide us with important intuitions about apophaticism. They will also allow us to confront it, as essential constitutive moments of Christian theology, with the systematic ambitions of reflection on Revelation. Thus, we are faced with two important questions: about the systematicity of theology and about the nature of apophaticism. These questions converge into a single issue of fundamental importance for theology and its method, but also for the entire Christian worldview: does apophasis invalidate the legitimacy of theology as such? In the face of apophasis as a rule of thought, is theology possible at all, and is it possible as a systematic reflection on Revelation?

¹ Cf. Brown – Simmons, *Contemporary Debates*. Important insights can be found in Coward – Fosbay, *Derrida* and Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics*.

1. Posing the Problem

Theology, like any other field of science, needs systematization. Systematicity itself (the ability to systematize, order and synthesize) is, in general, one of the basic criteria of its scientific character. Systematization here means not just arranging and presenting knowledge in some key, but reflecting a feature of a certain area of reality and thinking about it: something can only be systematically described when it is something concrete, when it exists as a concrete, if only as pure potentiality. Systematization is based on the truth of a thing and is an attempt to discover and theoretically reproduce it. Systematization of knowledge is thus a requirement for its meaningfulness and scientific nature. Systematization is also related to certainty of knowledge. Certain knowledge is characterized by the ability to express it in a meaningful, systematic way.

Recalling these facts seems to be the need of the hour today, when science theory is balancing between two approaches that cannot be brought together. The humanities, including oftentimes theology, are subject to the postmodern temptation to replace systematization (defined by the great quantifier “metanarrative”) with narrative, essentially an endless, lost in the labyrinth, formless interpretation. The empirical sciences, on the other hand, are the last bastion of common sense and hold firmly to their position of seeking certain, communicable and systematic knowledge. Their basic premise of seeking certainty is often understood as absolute. In the popularized version of the understanding of the sciences, they offer, thanks to this assumption of theirs, knowledge that is almost absolute. Systematicity in science is a necessity. The same is true in theology. In this regard, as Scottish theologian Alexis Torrance has argued, theology remains paradoxically close to the mentality of empirical sciences. However, it does not share the overly radical cognitive optimism that dominates the widespread, popular and very naive understanding of the empirical sciences and their nature, method and purpose. In the case of theology, its self-awareness of limitations is more radical – because of the object of study – than in the empirical sciences. Ultimately, however, what theology and the sciences have in common is a kind of helplessness in the face of the simple richness of reality.

Martin Heidegger tried to demonstrate this. His conviction that theology is as much systematic as it is immersed in history² was deeply and realistically part of the twentieth-century project of renewing its forms and deepening the understanding of its essential tasks, and probably, at least in part, stemmed from it. Evidence of such a renewal, its mature fruit, can be seen, for example, in the multi-volume study

² Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” 47: “The more historical theology is and the more immediately it brings to word and concept the historicity of faith, the more is it ‘systematic’ and the less likely is it to become the slave of a system. The radicality with which one knows of this task and its methodological exigencies is the criterion for the scientific level of a systematic theology.”

of dogmatics in a paradigm of history of salvation (*heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*).³ However, let us return to Heidegger. Rather, there is no doubt that theology understood in this way, in his view, is not limited to its history, but draws the vital forces and the object of its reflection from the concrete historical events through which the Triune God communicates Himself and transforms the subject receiving this communication in faith. Thus, historicity allows the systematicity of theology to be founded on the positive, conceptually expressible ground of history. The system here is, as it were, forced and enabled by the factuality of these events, never by a presuppositional metaphysics detached from history. History creates the space for a global view. It is not, as for the structuralists, merely a collection of unconnected, hectic, accidental and random events, but in its true nature makes it possible to reach the truth of existence emerging in time from events. This perspective of Heidegger is indeed based on his intuition of the fundamental connection between being and time and the temporal character of existence, which is inevitably tragic in its characteristic journey (being) towards death (*zum Tode Sein*), the limit of all systematization. Historicity thus makes systematicity possible, but also radically limits it. It appears, then, that Heidegger's claim quoted at the outset points to the horizons of the possibilities of theological systematization, as well as its limitations. And while Heidegger's presuppositional eschatological pessimism is wrong, one must concede that his intuition about systematization, its possibilities, and limits, is itself correct. The broad historicity of our existence provides both grounds and a limit to the possibilities of systematization. Unfortunately, Heidegger's theory is burdened with the error of atheism. This is why Heidegger's entire project of phenomenological hermeneutics ultimately takes on a pessimistic tinge. In an attempt to cover theological apophysis with a discourse on the inevitability of death as the radical end of being and understanding, the pessimism of Heidegger's concept of irreligious existence shows through. Heidegger's fundamental mistake seems to be his decision to radicalize the negative character of apophysis. Behind Heidegger's peculiar apophysis is his de facto atheism, marked by enormous philosophical, cognitive, and existential consequences.

Therefore, I propose in this article to reflect on the relationship between systematization and apophysis. Is theological apophysis an implicit pessimism or even a precursor of atheism, as Claude Bruaire diagnosed?⁴ Does apophysis ultimately exclude systematicity? Or does systematization need apophysis? These two seemingly mutually exclusive terms – systematicity and apophysis – are, in my opinion, an inseparable pair in theology and probably not only in it. The assumption that systematicity is the way to transcend cognitive and existential limitations is naive and untenable from the very perspective of the history of theology and dogma. I will try to show this in the first two sections of this article. Then, in the last two sections,

³ Cf. Feiner – Löhner, *Mysterium Salutis*.

⁴ Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu*, 21.

I will point out, first, the important way in which apophasis contributes to the systematic nature of theology, and thus its positive and necessary character for theology, and second, I will draw some specific methodological intuitions from the whole. Ultimately, the point is that apophasis is the inner moment of all systematization, its inherent element. This inseparability does not arise from or lead to cognitive pessimism. Heidegger, therefore, erred significantly: history is not only a measure of our finitude and time is not a sentence of final annihilation.

2. Apophasis in the Trinitarian Discourse

It is appropriate to begin our review with Trinitarian theology, since it is not only the center of all theological reflection, but also a kind of underlying framework that makes adequate theological systematizations possible.

I would like to begin my reflection on apophasis and Trinitarian theology with a certain forgotten medieval dispute. One of the most difficult issues of the Trinitarian debate, revealed especially in the Middle Ages, was the nature and epistemic status of the Father's unbegottenness. This issue, as is well known, was one of the points of disagreement between Thomas and Bonaventure. Thomas believed that unbegottenness merely meant the negation of the beginning (*negative tantum*). Bonaventure, on the other hand, saw the Father's *innescibilitas* as an expression of his perfection (*perfecta positio* and *plenitudo fontalis*). For him, unlike Thomas, negation is never a source and must contain some reference to a positive assertion. Thomas disagreed with his Franciscan colleague because, in his understanding, he saw in it a significant threat to the relationality of the divine persons, so important in his Trinitarian system. Bonaventure, on the other hand, wanted to emphasize – without tearing apart the unity and equality of the divine persons – the Trinitarian, personal order (*taxis, ordo*) that originates from and rests on the Father. What is important for us here is how to interpret negation. Can there be a pure negation, one that contains no reference to any positivity, to any affirmation? This is a truly metaphysical question with far-reaching implications in the field of theory of cognition and language. It seems that Bonaventure is right, and his defense of the positive dimension of unbegottenness says something important not only about itself but can be transferred into the space of understanding theological language, including especially the role and place of apophasis in theological discourse. Bonaventure's attitude is close to the classical understanding of negation, always in the broader perspective of positive assertion.⁵ Bonaventure's attitude, his interpretation of negation by relating it to a positive claim, can serve as the main intuition and guide in further reflections on apophatic theology.

⁵ For more details cf., Woźniak, *Primitas et plenitudo*.

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger points out the paradoxical nature of Trinitarian theology evident in its most classical formulation through the repetition or *redoublement* (*la loi de redoublement*)⁶ of the concepts of ousia-hypostasis.⁷ The basic paradox of Trinitarian theology resides in the Trinitarian formula “one ousia, three hypostasis,” which organically links unity with multiplicity. Broadly speaking, his evaluation and hermeneutics of the conceptual tools of Trinitarian discourse is based on the conviction that ordinary cognitive limitations combined with the natural limits of language determine the nature of theological knowledge. The example of the developmental dynamics of Trinitarian theology and its concepts serves Ratzinger to reveal a fundamental characteristic of theological knowledge. Its task is not to enclose reality in concepts, to reduce it to stagnant categories of thought, but to open it up, to initiate thinking in the concrete direction determined by the historical interplay of heresy and orthodoxy. Thus, to the extent that the Trinitarian formula is paradoxical, it is at the same time apophatic: it simultaneously points to the possibilities of thinking and understanding and marks the area of ignorance and inaccessibility, the radical otherness of its object of reference. Knowledge in theology does not pretend to privilege theory over reality,⁸ or language over being,⁹ but presupposes an ever better, coherent opening to that reality. The theological apophasis in the Trinitarian discourse thus serves to identify and orient knowledge to reality, not to theory. It fundamentally reveals the inadequacy of all theoretical and conceptual approaches. At the same time, this inadequacy is not about fallibility, but always about the primacy of reality itself over ideas. Theological theory should therefore balance between identifying concrete patterns that make it possible to define its object, and pointing to its own cognitive limitations. Explanation in theology does not mean the final resolution of a problem, but pointing out its meaningfulness and, at the same time, the inadequacy of any theory in relation to the very object of search. As one can see, the apophatic moment is presupposed here as an essential and inalienable part of the cognitive strategy. The system and apophasis are not mutually exclusive, but mutually complementary.¹⁰ Theological

6 Redoublement is described in Lafont, *Peut-on connaître*, 130: “Pour dire un aspect quelconque du Mystère, il faut toujours employer en succession continue deux formules qui, sans doute, se complètent, la Révélation nous en est garante, mais dont nous ne pouvons saisir que la non-contradiction.”

7 For the concept of person both in Christology and Trinitarian theology, see Patterson, *Chalcedonian Personalism*, 3–29. Cf. Larchet, *Personne at nature*.

8 I can see a sort of similarity here between Ratzinger and pope Francis. Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 231: “There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. So a third principle comes into play: realities are greater than ideas. This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality[...].”

9 Maspero, “Ontologia e dogma,” 333: “Il discorso sulle Persone divine e le loro distinzioni relazionali non viola l’apofatismo, caposaldo ontologico della concezione cappadoce, che sempre afferma l’eccezione dell’essere rispetto al linguaggio.”

10 As Ari Ojell (“Apophatic Theology,” 68) points out in the case of Gregory of Nyssa: “The theology of G. is apophatic in the sense that apophasis is a systematic device in his works, as a part of a speculative system that he has sought to construct in coherent manner in order to support the Trinitarian confession.”

theory and theological system must contain an apophatic moment, which protects them from error (especially the reduction of reality to theory), simplification and cognitive stagnation.

Ratzinger's Trinitarian theology is clearly based on ancient disputes over the nature of theological knowledge of the Trinity and theological language itself in general, as well as their theoretical benefits. One important aspect of these disputes was the theory of theological knowledge, meaning of negation and the language of theology.¹¹ This can be seen clearly in the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians and in the way they rejected and refuted the theory of the Eunomians. Let us briefly recall what the dispute was about. Eunomius and his followers radically denied the divinity of the Son. Their argument was based on the premise that if the Son is begotten, he cannot be God equal to the Father.¹² The response of the Cappadocians, especially Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, follows the line of analyzing the eunomian argument and identifying the initial error hidden in them. The Cappadocians find this error in the eunomian theory of language.¹³ Their Trinitarian error stems from an error in understanding the nature of language. Eunomians turn out to be linguistic naturalists and hyperrealists in a close analysis of Cappadocians. They believe that the concepts of our language fully correspond to the described reality. Meanwhile, Cappadocians argue, language is a finite, limited, imperfect reality. To put it a bit more technically: language is a created reality, and as such is incapable of adequately closing the gap dividing the Creator and the creation.

It is worth summarizing the above themes with Rowan Williams, who, in his own proper way, demonstrates the hermeneutical depth of the issues raised here. "Negative theology of the trinitarian life," affirms the British theologian,

derives its negative character not from general and programmatic principles about the ineffability of the divine nature, but from the character of the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and thus also in the lives and life-patterns of believers. The apophatic is not simply a response to the perceived grammar of talking about God – though this is a significant element in apophatic usage and an appeal to the narrative and relational aspect of it should not blind us to these grammatical considerations. The development of a coherent language about the unknowability of the divine nature went originally hand-in-hand with a clarification of the distinctness of the hypostases. The more it became necessary to insist that the difference of the hypostases could not be assimilated to the sort of differences with which we are familiar, the clearer it became that the differentiation of Father, Son and Spirit had to be conceived in the strictest possible connection with the traditional set of negations about divine nature – that it does not admit of materiality, divisibility, degrees

11 Very good and comprehensive introduction to these issues can be found in Stępien – Kocharczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*.

12 For more details cf. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 252–265.

13 Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*; Usacheva, *Knowledge*, 59–70.

of completeness, varying levels of instantiation and so on [...] Thus the use of negation to characterise the divine life expresses not simply the retreat of the finite mind before infinite reality – though it does at least that; it expresses the process of “finding our way” within the life of the three divine agencies or subsistents [...] Apophatic theology is more than a conceptual move, because it is anchored in the reality of personal kenosis, divine and human. Here is the final answer to the question about how we are, in negative theology, to avoid a polarising of inaccessible divine substance of nature and manifest persons. Apophatic observations about the divine nature are “grammatical” remarks about the impossibility of specifying what it is that makes God to be God. Apophatic accounts of the trinitarian persons and their relations are a way of expressing and evoking the particular theme of the endlessness and non-possession of trinitarian relation, gift or love. The two dimensions of negative theology here do not represent two objects under discussion (nature and persons), but simply mark the two moments of recognising the radicality of divine difference that arise in the lived process of not only trying to speak consistently of God but trying to live coherently in the pattern of divine life as it is made concrete to us in the history of Jesus and made available to us in the common life of the Spirit-filled community.¹⁴

3. Apophasis in Christology

The moment of connection between apophasis and systematization is most evident in classical Christology. By its classical version I mean the scheme developed in Chalcedonian theology. Let us recall an important part of the definition of Christological faith:

Following, therefore, the holy fathers, we all in harmony teach confession of one and the same Son our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and the same truly man, of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in respect of the Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in respect of the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin, begotten from the Father before the ages in respect of the Godhead, and the same in the last days for us and for our salvation from the Virgin Mary the Theotokos in respect of the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation (the difference of the natures being in no way destroyed by the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved and coming together into one person and one hypostasis), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, Only-begotten, God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ, even as the prophets from of old and Jesus Christ himself taught us about him and the symbol of the fathers has handed down to us.¹⁵

¹⁴ Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 133–135.

¹⁵ Price, *The Acts*, 207.

It is well known, and can be easily seen in the quoted text, that the dogmatic formula of the Council of Chalcedon is the result of an attempt to mediate between two ways of thinking, which are broadly defined by the names of the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools. The Chalcedonian *horos* is a kind of attempt to reach a compromise between the theology of the Antiochians, emphasizing the distinction of natures in Christ, and the Alexandrians trying to emphasize the radical unity of Christ at all costs. The Christological formula asserts the existence in Christ of a personal unity of two natures, divine and human, and up to this point is eminently positive, affirmative, cataphatic.¹⁶

However, the systematic nature of the Chalcedonian formula is not limited to positive statements. At the very meaningful center of the *horos*, we find a definite expression of the apophatic consciousness of the Council fathers.¹⁷ The four negations clearly demonstrate that the fathers do not claim to understand and linguistically exhaust the mystery described. This is not the intent of the definition at all. Emphasizing that the hypostatic union took place without mixing and changing, and without separation and disconnection of the two natures indicates that they have no positive knowledge of the mode of union itself beyond the aforementioned formula that speaks of union in *hyspostasis* of the two natures. They only know, in a certain way, how this union should not be understood. It is in this apophatic moment that one should see the essential mediation and compromise as the vital presuppositions and goals of the conciliar assembly. It is this moment that is an essential, inalienable part of the description of the hypostatic union.

¹⁶ In this sense, I agree with Bruce McCormack's statement (*The Humility*, 57): "the real interest of the majority of bishops at Chalcedon does not lie so much in the integrity of the natures, important as that was to them. Their attention was captured by the unity, the singularity of the Christological 'person' in whom the two natures subsist. There is, they say, but one prosopon and one hypostasis – not two. One prosopon might have left ambiguity, but one hypostasis (one 'concrete existence' of a single individual) most certainly does not. The one hypostasis in which the natures subsist is that of the eternal Word. Seen in this light, it is a serious error – made by both conservatives and liberals in twentieth century Anglo-American theology – to become fixated on the four adverbs (without confusion, without change, without division, without separation), as though the Chalcedonian Definition lived from its negations and had nothing positive to say. No, a well-developed Christological model is being advanced here, albeit in abbreviated form, and that model is Cyril's in all of its decisive respects."

¹⁷ Coakley, "What Does Chalcedon Solve," 159–163. On the pages 161–162 one can find an important affirmation: "It is worth enumerating, finally and in closing, some of the vital christological issues that Chalcedon per se cannot and does not solve. Not only is this undertaking suitably chastening, it also invites the last ecumenical reflection: is Chalcedon's 'limit' regrettable or laudable? Thus: (1) Chalcedon does not tell us in what the divine and human 'natures' consist; (2) it does not tell us what hypostasis means when applied to Christ; (3) it does not tell us how hypostasis and physeis are related, or how the physeis relate to one another (the problem of the *communicatio idiomatum*); (4) it does not tell us how many wills Christ has; (5) it does not tell us that the hypostasis is identical with the pre-existent Logos; (6) it does not tell us what happens to the physeis at Christ's death and in his resurrection; (7) it does not tell us whether the meaning of hypostasis in this christological context is different, or the same, from the meaning in the trinitarian context; (8) it does not tell us whether the risen Christ is male."

Thus, the Christological apophysis of Chalcedon belongs to and is an integral part of the positive interpretation of the mystery of Christ. It seems that in this respect, the positive and negative moments integrally and organically overlap and merge to form a systematic, comprehensive picture of the mystery.¹⁸ The formula proposed by Chalcedon remains the cornerstone of all Christological reflection and is impassable, above all in terms of its fundamental intuition and the aforementioned apophaticism. Theology in the future, in dialogue with philosophy and the empirical sciences, may find new concepts to better grasp the unity and plurality in Christ – in this respect (as a statement of the differentiated unity of Christ), it seems impassable in terms of its basic intuition (the coexistence of unity and plurality), not the concepts used in it. Similarly, it should be said that the formula is impassable in terms of its apophatic nature. What is stated therein is not merely the categorical, historical ignorance of the Council fathers, but the apophatic nature of the very reality they describe of the coexistence of unity and plurality expressed through the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Thus, it should be stated that the Chalcedonian dogmatic definition includes both the intuition of Christ's differentiated unity, the hypostatic union, and the impossibility of rationally grasping and positively expressing the manner in which it occurred. Such impossibility is not meant to inhibit and stop thinking and searching for better ways to express the revealed facts. Its function, however, is to sustain awareness of the uniqueness of what was accomplished in Christ. Apophysis, the apophatic element, thus proves to be a constant moment of all systematizations in the field of Christology.

It must not be forgotten at this point that Christology plays a unique role in theology as a whole.¹⁹ The Chalcedonian dogma, in all its parts, determines a certain type of thinking, the grammar of Christian theology. This grammar contains the basic information on how theological reasoning should be done, and at the same time is the fundamental theory of theological language.²⁰ As such, it is a source in understanding the theological episteme in itself. If we consistently accept the Chalcedonian dogma in all its integrity, with all its components, we will find that the moment of apophysis, which we have already discovered earlier in the space of

¹⁸ It is difficult not to mention here the further development of the Chalcedonian formula, especially the achievements of the reflection of Leontius of Byzantium founding the so-called Neo-Chalcedonism of the Second Council of Constantinople (553). St. Leontius' doctrine of personal union and his theory of the person in Christ clearly revolves around assertion and negation. Leontius states that there is no human hypostasis in the incarnate Word, and that the function of hypostasis is performed for him by the divine hypostasis of the Word. Leontius is keen to positively emphasize the personal unity of the incarnate Word. To express it in all its fullness, he uses not only affirmation (*en-hypostatos*), but also negation (*a-hypostatos*). He thus continues the essential apophatic theme of the entire theological tradition. For more details cf. Daley, *Introduction*, 73–75.

¹⁹ Woźniak, "The Christological Prism," 519–530.

²⁰ On the Chalcedonian theory of language cf. Need, *Human Language*; on the apophatic dimension of the issue see *ibidem*, 74–76.

Trinitarian theology, is inalienable in the Christian understanding of God, the world and the relationship between the world and God. Let us put it bluntly. Assuming that the essential element, both from an intellectual and existential perspective, of Christian theology is the mystery of the closeness of God and the world, a mystery that reaches its peak in the hypostatic union and draws its strength from it, it must be said that to the extent that theology wants to be systematic in its description of this mystery, it must not only be grounded in a history open to positive metaphysical description, but must also include an apophatic moment. Christology and Trinitarian theology discover the said mystery and point to it. This mystery itself, indicated, identified, is forever beyond the possibility of exhaustive investigation and justification within the category of “pure reason.” Therefore, if apophasis is central to Christology, which in turn is the grammar of all categorical theological statements, this means that any truly Christian theological system must include an apophatic element.

In conclusion, it is clear from the above reasoning that apophasis is both a dimension of Christological systematicity, and that any adequate Christological system is characterized by the feature of apophaticism. This can be clearly seen at two points. First, there is the noted conceptual doubling (repetition) (*hypostasis* and *ousia*) present in both Trinitarian theology and Christology. Second, the Christological formula contains within itself a distinct apophatic moment, which refers to the manner of the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ. In the first case, we encounter in the hermeneutics of dogma a conceptual impotence of language expressed in the inability to contain the described reality of Revelation in a single concept. In the second case, on the other hand, it is a conscious expression of the lack of knowledge regarding the said union of the two natures. The Fathers are able to perceive the truth of the Revealed fact, they know what took place, but they do not know how this union happened. This lack of knowledge, of course, also applies to the consequences of the union itself, such as the manner of communication between the two natures. This can be seen clearly in the problem of Jesus’ human consciousness. This issue, however, goes beyond the subject matter of the present text.

4. Mind the Gap!

The above review of the relationship of systematization in Trinitarian theology and Christology should be put to the more global question of what is the real meaning of apophasis in theology?

In order to find an answer to this question, it is first necessary to illuminate the relationship between the three fundamental classical ways of speaking about the Triune

God. Theology has classically assumed three cognitive strategies: assertion, negation and elevation. Let us first note the nature of the continuum of the aforementioned triad. All of its three moments are interrelated, they constitute a kind of structure. As a structure, they constitute a chronologically and purposefully ordered whole. Theology always begins its path of cognition and understanding with an assertion, which by its nature is based on the principle of analogy. It then makes a negation, also ultimately resulting from its analogical nature. At the very end of the path of cognition is the moment of transcendence, indeed tinged with the distinctly liturgical nature of theological activity. As an example, consider the concept of goodness applied to the Triune God. The cognitive triad would look as follows in this case: God is good (assertion), God is not good as creatures are good (negation), God is super-good (liturgical language of superiority, glory). Note that the two moments of the triad have a clearly positive character, and the fact that the whole triad aims at liturgical praise. It follows therefore that apophasis is neither primary nor final in theology. It is not apophasis that is its goal, but the liturgical adoration of God. All theology aims at the adoration of God. Apophasis is essential and inalienable here, but its nature can only be understood in terms of the cataphatic, liturgical purposiveness of all activity in theology. Apophasis, negation, does not have its own independent life in theology but serves the positive reading of the central message of the gospel and Christianity.

What does this positivity, palpable in the linguistic and cognitive strategy of Christian theology, concern? The answer is to be found in Christianity's central belief in divine-human communion. At the center of Christianity is not the Triune God himself or man alone, but, by virtue of divine Trinitarian freedom and choice, the divine-human communion. It is undoubtedly Aristotle Papanikolaou who can be credited with demonstrating that apophatic discourse is a radical requirement for such an account of the essence of Christianity.²¹ The divine-human communion is built on the deification of man. Using the example of Lossky and Zizioulas, Papanikolaou points out in *Being with God* the essential connection between Trinitarian theology, apophaticism and the reality of deifying communion with God. The thread of the relationship between the Trinitarian deification discourse and apophasis deserves careful theological analysis. I believe that it is in it that the essence of apophasis, as well as its purposefulness, becomes most apparent. If we accept the organic connection between Trinitarian theology and deification, apophasis turns out to be an additional factor connecting the two realities. We have already learned the place and importance of apophasis within the boundaries of Trinitarian and Christological discourse. In both cases, apophasis has proven to be an essential component of the globally framed project of Christian theology. This important role of apophasis should be understood from a cognitive perspective, but not only that way. The apophatic moment

²¹ Papanikolaou, *Being With God*.

of Trinitarian theology and Christology enters into the general theological theory of cognition as its organic moment. At the same time, it is a constituent and indispensable dimension of the theology of deification and Christian anthropology based on it.

In this regard, special attention should be paid to the application of the two moments of apophatic discourse, discovered in Trinitarian theology and Christology, to the doctrine of deification and Christian anthropology based on it. These are the distinction between person and nature described above and the apophatic moment of the Chalcedonian dogma describing from the negative perspective the personal union of two natures in the one person of the incarnate Word.

The doctrine of deification describes the real transformation that takes place in man under the influence of an encounter with God and the granting of His Trinitarian grace. This transformation is real. Through it, the Triune God dwells personally in man, permeating all dimensions of his human existence with His sanctifying presence. The result of the deifying action of the Triune God in man is his full hominization. This entire process cannot be understood without applying to it, as a hermeneutical paradigm, the apophatic themes of Trinitarian theology and Christology. First, since deification takes place as the indwelling of the Trinity in man, resulting in man's participation in the divine nature, the nature of this deification remains ultimately encompassed by the rule of Trinitarian apophasis. Man's personal participation in the Trinitarian nature of God is inexpressible in all its fullness in human language. Just as the richness of the revealed mystery of the inner life of the Trinity cannot be encapsulated in a single concept and requires conceptual doubling (personal and natural order), so deification requires a constant balancing act ("suspended middle") between nature and grace. The idea of deification does not cognitively exhaust what actually becomes of man and takes place in him through the work of the Triune God. It only points to the fact itself as impossible to encapsulate and inexhaustible in a single concept.

In such a perspective, we can touch on an important thread of the theology of deification. It is a matter of great importance, including in the area of contemporary Christian apologetics, whose main challenge becomes the problem of connecting human subjectivity, its enduring value and distinctiveness (autonomy) in the perspective of God's action. Henri de Lubac has shown that modern atheism (I think this diagnosis remains relevant also with regard to the recently widely discussed "new atheism") is based on the conviction that religion leads to alienation and degradation of man.²² As we can see, deification can be understood in the monophysite paradigm

²² De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, xxv: "On the one hand, though the dualist – or, perhaps better, separatist – thesis has finished its course, it may be only just beginning to bear its bitterest fruit. As fast as professional theology moves away from it, it becomes so much more widespread in the sphere of practical action. While wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, people had in fact exiled it altogether – both from intellectual and from social life – leaving the field free to be taken over by secularism. Today that secularism, following its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They

as a kind of possession of man by God. It is at this point that Chalcedonian apophaticism comes to the rescue. Indeed, it is not only concerned with the structure of Christ's being, but it also turns out to be crucial for understanding Christian anthropology founded on deification.²³ As we remember, the conciliatory nature of the Chalcedonian dogma, without pointing to the manner of personal union, indicates how it did not happen. The idea is to push away the shallow approaches conventionally called Monophysite and Nestorian. The whole strategy clearly indicates that the union is real and at the same time it does not entail either the mixing of natures (divine nature does not absorb human nature) or their separation (the union is real, existential and metaphysical). One can now see how this definition relates to anthropology based on deification. Theosis – analogous to the hypostatic union – does not entail the annihilation of what is human. Nor does it modify the granting divinity. On the contrary, the granting Trinity remains unchanged, and the deified man becomes fully himself. Thus, although we cannot express what is accomplished in deification (the apophatic moment), we know that its effect is something radically positive – the fullness of humanity in the imitation of humanity of the incarnate Word. Deification thus preserves the difference between the Creator and the creation.

This brings us to the crucial moment of the meaning of apophasis. We already know that apophasis does not exhaust the nature of theology, but is a component part of its inherently positive, cataphatic orientation. This, in turn, is based on the ontological difference between God and man, the Creator and the creation. Apophasis in theology stems from this difference, from its metaphysical, indelible factuality and subjective consciousness. At the same time, it is apophasis that articulates this difference, which not only remains intact in the union, but is also the condition of its possibility and meaningfulness. Apophasis is thus, metaphysically speaking, the result of the actual metaphysical difference between the Creator and the creation. As part of the cognitive strategy of theology, it corresponds to the awareness of the existence and essentiality of this difference and its ultimately positive character. Apophasis reminds us to “mind the gap.”²⁴

too seek to find a harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or an atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to him, is pushed so far into the background as to look like disappearing for good. The last word in Christian progress and the entry into adulthood would then appear to consist in a total secularization which would expel God not merely from the life of society, but from culture and even from personal relationships.” Cf. De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

²³ Cf. Torrance, *Human Perfection*.

²⁴ More on the topic of the relation between apophasis and the difference/gap and on the centrality of apophatic strategy in the theological and anthropological discourse on deification cf. Woźniak, *Różnica i tajemnica*, 397–486. The most important conviction in this book can be summarized by the following quotations: (a.) “Apophatic theology is a way of perceiving and articulating the difference between God and His creation, a difference that does not disappear in the event of salvific revelation, but is reinforced and exposed in it as an essential and fundamental element of union” (*ibidem* 471) and (b.) “At first glance, it might seem that a reading of Christianity in the key of radicalized apophaticism is appropriate. After all,

At this point, we shall return to the already discussed topic of *diastêma*, the gap, the difference. The awareness of it has been a constant reference point for theology since antiquity and a basic formal determinant of its methodology. Gregory of Nyssa,²⁵ Dionysius and Maximus²⁶ made it one of the cornerstones of their theological systems. This situation did not change in the Middle Ages either.²⁷ However, it was significantly violated by modern idealisms with their ever-present temptation to neglect the ontological difference between the Creator and the creation. Their starting point and destination was pantheism, in the shadow of which atheism, the rejection of God in the name of existence and human freedom, was already hidden. The classical emphasis on the existence of the *diastêma*, let us note, was not

Christianity is an experience of God's transcendence, His absolute otherness, the difference separating Him and the world. However, as the analysis of the concept of difference in its relation to the event of revelation has shown, this difference, from the point of view of Christian theology, does not lead to the disappearance of knowledge or existential contact. Difference is not a dialectical concept in Christianity. Hence, Christian apophaticism as an affirmation of difference cannot serve to ground cognitive-metaphysical skepticism and affirm the moral disorder that characterizes the postmodern worldview. The theological theory of cognition in Christianity is always based on the excess of light that enters the world in the event of Christ. His grace is the grace of cognition, of divine-human fellowship in the freedom to know and love. In the light of the Spirit illuminating the Christ event – in some mysterious way that no one could ever foresee or expect – one can see the invisible Father Himself, the source of divinity and the source of the world's existence. St. Thomas's visio Dei is not a pipe dream of alienated reason, but a gracious granting of God in the Son and the Spirit, in which knowledge and ignorance of him presuppose each other, founding the possibility of continual encounter, that is, at the same time, the possibility of man's continual coming to himself from the depths of his encounter with God in Christ and the Spirit" (*ibidem* 486–487).

²⁵ Douglass, "Diastêma," 227: "Ever since the publication in 1942 of von Balthasar's *Présence et pensée*, the importance of the concept of *diastêma* (διαστήμα) in the thought of Gregory has received considerable attention. The word itself refers to 'an interval or a gap' and, in its more conceptual register, to 'the inescapable horizontal extensions of both space and time.' To Gregory, it was the very fabric of the created order. Along with *kinêsis*, its presence indelibly marked creation as having been created and therefore constituted what Hans Urs von Balthasar aptly called the 'irréductible opposition entre Dieu et la créature.' Gregory observed: 'For the gap is great and impassable by which the uncreated nature is hindered from the created essence . . . the one is stretched out by a certain dimensional extension (*diastématikê*), being enclosed by time and space, the other transcends every notion of dimension (*diastêmatos*) . . .' (GNO I, 246, 14–21) Creation has *diastêma*; God does not. Creation is 'enclosed by time and space; God is not. The implications of this fundamental distinction and its relationship to *diastêma* permeated all of Gregory's theological thinking (*diastêma* and its cognates appear in 23 of his works). On an epistemological level, the implications of *diastêma* concerned the restricted scope of any human knowledge of God: 'Thus the whole created order is unable to get out of itself through a comprehensive vision, but remains continually enclosed within itself, and whatever it beholds, it is looking at itself . . . One may struggle to surpass or transcend *diastématikên* conception . . . but he does not transcend. For in every object it conceptually discovers, it always comprehends the *diastêma* inherent in the being of the apprehended object, for *diastêma* is nothing other than creation itself' (GNO V, 412, 6–14). Every human perception and conception begins and ends with *diastêma*: it can be neither transcended nor escaped. Humanity's desire, therefore, to understand a God who transcends every notion of *diastêma* must constantly negotiate the self-referential inability to conceive or comprehend anything but *diastêma*. Language itself is one of the by-products of this negotiation. Gregory established the following ratios: *diastêma*, language."

²⁶ Cf. Lévy, *Le créé et l'incrédé*.

²⁷ Cf. Raffray, *Métaphysique des relations*. Cf. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*. One should refer to two important studies: Humbrecht, *Théologie négative* and Humbrecht, *Trinité et création*.

only about the truth of the Triune God, but also about man and his vocation to participate in the Trinitarian, personal life of God. *Diastêma* secures not only the transcendence of the Triune God, but also the identity of man. At the same time, it is not a measure of remoteness, but de facto, a measure of possible proximity. *Diastêma* is therefore required not only in theology, but also in anthropology and soteriology. It is also required in an evangelically adequate theory of spiritual life. In a manner appropriate to Christianity, theology, anthropology and soteriology here interlock and condition one another. Apophasis, as a cognitive and communicative strategy, serves the *diastêma* as a structural element of any adequate vision of the essence of Christianity. For it makes it possible to simultaneously articulate the transcendence of the self-giving Trinity, man's otherness and identity, and the radically true and transformative divine-human communion (*theosis*) that makes man a new creation.

Let us draw conclusions from this state of affairs regarding the relationship between the system and apophasis. On the one hand, apophasis understood in this way is a necessary moment of a theological system for substantive reasons already enumerated and described above. On the other hand, any system without apophasis as a cognitive and communicative strategy that allows for the simultaneous articulation of the positivity of difference and the possibility of communion is at risk of being a totalitarian simulacrum of reality and its truth. The totalitarianism of the system – from the epistemological perspective – is characterized by the drive to exhaust reality, to finally encapsulate its meaning in a concept. This approach has obvious consequences in the field of politics and social life, analyzed quite thoroughly by E. Levinas and H. Arendt, among others. Their analysis, however, goes beyond the subject of the present study. What is important for us is the observation that in the case of totalitarian, unifying systems, quite the opposite of Christian theology, reality is replaced by ideas and the expression of the positivity of otherness becomes virtually impossible. It is then difficult to talk about systematicity in general. A system that replaces reality with ideas does not satisfy either the truth of things or the requirements of systematicity.

An outstanding example of such a systemic approach is Hegel's theory.²⁸ Yes, it contains a strong negative moment, but this one has nothing to do with apophasis and its metaphysical and theological ideological background. Negation here leads to the establishment of an undifferentiated unity of reality, the pinnacle of which is a concept. Hegel forgot about the difference and tried to transcend it in an empty, cold idea in which everything and nothing are identified with each other.²⁹

²⁸ For a historical, intellectual and social background of such a philosophical development and its real meaning cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, 76–124.

²⁹ For more on this topic, see Hass, "Hegel," 131–161.

Conclusion: Some Methodological Remarks in the Context Of Transcending Heideggerian Cognitive Pessimism

We can now return to Heidegger's pessimism. Let us recall that he claimed that theology, in order to be systematic, must reject metaphysics and become an existential reflection on history. And to consider historicity, human thinking being in time, as this being always, irrevocably and inevitably leads to defeat, ultimately means radical cognitive pessimism.

Adopting from Heidegger the conviction that the essential moment of the definition of systematics is its connection with the historicity of our existence, with our being in a particular time and place, I understand it to mean that this being and its temporal spatiality becomes, through the divine *eudokia*, the means of revelation and salvation. In other words, it is about the created and redeemed nature of our existence as the fundamental determination of its character and the scope of its possibilities and limitations. It is in this fundamental sense that history cannot be understood solely as a journey toward nothingness, as a journey toward death, as the ultimate end of a human being and hence the end and sign of the futility of any hermeneutic project. Instead, it becomes a medium, a space, a horizon for the deifying human transformation. It remains an essential limitation for the seeking man, but at the same time in this limitation it represents, thanks to grace, a real possibility of finite openness to the infinite. Here we observe a kind of transformation of the meaning of negativity and cognitive limitations. From the radical obstacle and impossibility of human fulfillment, the natural limitation of history is embraced by the radical positivity of God's actual action within it. This embrace does not abolish man's natural finiteness and limitation, but opens them to eternity, transforming them in such a way that they become an inner moment of opening to the infinite. All this is not irrelevant to the understanding of apophysis itself. For it confirms our initial intuition that the negative apophatic moment of theological discourse is encompassed by the positivity of the divine event itself for and within history, an event that in the resurrection is the opening of the way. This does not in any way nullify the essence of the apophatic moment, but gives it the ultimate meaning and a natural place in theology.

In order to gather the presented themes into a whole, as well as to draw concrete inspiration from them for theologians' daily work, I propose the following theses on both the nature and method of theology.

First, Christian theology contains *de jure*, by virtue of its own essence, an apophatic moment. Its aim is not so much and not originally a mere rational explanation, but to point to the fundamental facts of Revelation without reducing them to the categories of previously known experience. Without apophysis, it is not possible to grasp properly the object of theological discourse without naturalizing and rationalizing it. Therefore, since theology cannot achieve without an apophatic moment

the realization of its own task and its own nature, it cannot become systematic without it. This can be expressed in yet another way: since the proper object of theology is revelation in all its uniqueness and otherness beyond natural expectations and foresight, theology cannot satisfy this object and render it, describe it adequately without strongly emphasizing this otherness. This emphasis is achieved precisely through apophasis, whose cognitive strategy is directed towards expressing the otherness of what has been given, revealed. Theology can only become systematic if it can point to the otherness emphasized here.

Second, precisely for this reason, the apophatic rule, the apophatic moment of theology, is not an end in itself, but plays a servant role in the holistic theological project. Theology does not reduce itself to a strategy of negation. It aims to make certain positive claims. This positive moment is indeed important for understanding the nature and purpose of Christian theology. And although it never exists – at least in the present aeon – in isolation from apophasis, it comes to the fore and determines all theological activity. In this positivity, the main task of theology is the indication of the transformation taking place in man and the world through God's action. This action, in itself, to be adequately illuminated, requires to be positioned between assertion and negation, with the assumption that ultimately the whole triadic structure of theology aims at liturgical adoration.

Third, the apophatic moment of theology is organically linked to the possibility of creating theological systems. It is not that apophasis determines the systematicity of theology, but that it is an indispensable part of it. The project of systematization and system-making in Christian theology is not possible without presupposing the possibility of arriving at truly positive knowledge. Theology can become systematic not because the only thing it can express is the absolute ineffability of God, but because, in all its awareness of this ineffability and unknowability, it points to the positive excess of the mystery given, also to be understood. In this respect, apophasis contributes to the systematicity of theology insofar as it emphasizes the positive knowledge of God's ineffability, in which the conviction of his divine magnificence is concealed *in nuce*.

Fourth, the rationality of theology should not be understood as stripping the mystery of its mysteriousness, but as illuminating it more fully, showing all its surprising grandeur and splendor. To the extent that theology is able to respect the mystery of the Triune God in this way, that is, to respect His concrete, historical unveiling and giving of Himself to us, to respect it in all its difference and otherness (apophatic moment), to that extent it is rational and systematic.

Fifth, the expression of the rationality of theology, of its cognitively positive character, is the awareness of its own ignorance and of the irreducibility of the reality given in Revelation to concepts. Theologians in their work are aware that they are not able to contain Revelation in a single concept, moreover, that every concept will always be incomplete, inadequate. For this reason, any good theological systematization

requires an adequate understanding of language, which is capable of encompassing both its natural limitations and the perspectives given to it in Revelation. Systematization thus requires not only an acknowledgement of cognitive weakness, but also coming to terms with the limitation of language's capacity to express and communicate what is already somehow understood. The more theology can take into account the factuality of all these limitations, the more systematic it becomes.

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