

# Theology as Human Language in Response to God's Revelation

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"God is the Lord and has revealed himself to us,  
Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord".<sup>1</sup>

Man has from the earliest time looked into the night sky, sensed his insignificance and sought understanding. Indeed, to understand implies to know. This search raised in man a "mysterium tremendum", a sacred awe for the divine, and also a "mysterium fascinosum", a need for encounter with the divine. Whilst in Athens, St Paul, amongst the pantheon of Gods, found an altar inscribed "To an Unknown God".<sup>2</sup> Hence, Paul was able to address the Athenians and inform them that:

what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you, For in (God) we live and move and have our being<sup>3</sup>

In so doing Paul explained the message of Christianity which was accepted by some and rejected by others, and called upon the Athenians to repent and become followers.

Thus, the Greek world with its philosophy and impersonal Gods, found itself confronted by a relational and personal God of love who sent his son Christ to give salvation to his creation. For the Jews also, this same God that Paul proclaimed, was the one who appeared to Moses in "thick darkness"<sup>4</sup> and whose face could not be seen and whose very name could not be said. Hence, both Jewish and Greek cosmological ontologies of thought were not able to comprehend the Christian God who was both immanent and transcendent simultaneously. This antimony of "being" and "not being" simultaneously made the message of Christ impossible to grasp intellectually by the ancients. It is accordingly little wonder that Paul later wrote that "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ Crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the gentiles"<sup>5</sup>.

Christians, on the other hand, through faith confess that the incarnated Christ as God in the hypostasis of the Son took on human form, and hence united humanity and divinity in one person. This in turn allowed those that had eyes to see, and ears to hear to recognise that in the historic Jesus, man was given a bridge to the creator through this very humanity of Christ. God for Christians can thus be known through the Son and theology can begin.

The purpose of this essay is to explain how God reveals himself to man and our response to this revelation. It will be further considered whether this perceived revelation carries any responsibilities, and what impact that has upon mankind as it continues to search for and listen to God.

## **THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISSAC AND JACOB**

The Jews experienced and understood God as Monad who intervened in history periodically in direct encounter with individuals. As Paul writes in his epistle to the Hebrews, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets many times and in various ways"<sup>6</sup>. Yet the God of the Jews and the God of the Christians is the same. As John's Gospel makes plain, the Word was with God in the beginning, and later became flesh and "dwelt amongst us". Hence, the various theophanies of the Old Testament were misunderstood by the Jews who received through Moses only God's law and not "grace" and "truth" that came through Jesus Christ<sup>7</sup>.

## **THE LORD OF ALL**

To the Christian, the centre of faith is the Lordship and divinity of the resurrected Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who is now seated on the right hand of the Father. Without Christ "the whole doctrine of salvation loses its ontological foundation. We remain separated from God. Deification is forbidden"<sup>8</sup>. Thus Christ, without being fully God, as babe, child, or in his passion, would be considered no more than a minor historic figure in an eastern outpost of the Roman Empire. That Christ lived as God-man and was crucified is best reflected by Paul who states "if Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead"<sup>9</sup>.

Man stands at the very centre of creation and was made in the image and likeness of God to have dominion over all creation.<sup>10</sup> Man thus created, had and has, free will in a body with a Spiritual soul. The body, although material, is considered to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, the soul is of greater worth for as Jesus says, "what should it profit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his soul?"<sup>11</sup>. As the body

has two separate, yet co-existent elements, the references to "image" and "likeness" also have similitude.

Image relates to man as created by God and likeness relates to the spiritual growth of man towards God. Hence, man moves towards theosis by his response towards God. Man as "image" has free will and his place in creation. Man as "likeness" uses his position to develop his virtue and inclination to grow towards God. That Adam used his free will to become self-centred resulted in his rejecting God. This hubris of Adam led to his alienation from God, physical death, and a corruption in man of the divine image of God. This led to conflict within himself between good and evil and the misery that such conflict brings, even to death as when Cain through jealousy killed his brother Abel.<sup>12</sup>

God, however, never lost his love for man and his creation despite being rejected by man. As part of his divine plan he sent into the world his son who through the incarnation, epiphany, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and through sending the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, did fulfil his work, which was to reconcile man with God. This work was accomplished by the Trinitarian Godhead through Christ.

## **THE HOLY TRINITY**

God is one in essence, but triple in "person". That is, God is a tri-unity and tri-hypostatical, yet a Trinity "one" in essence. Further, the Father is unbegotten, the son begotten from the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. Thus, each "person" is contained in the very nature of the oneness of the trinity, of which Gregory of Nazianzus expressed as wrong the attempts of "dividing in three the non-divisible divinity"<sup>13</sup>. Thus, for Christians, Paul was able to say that Jesus Christ incarnated was in the measure of all things divine and human for "in him dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead"<sup>14</sup>. This means that Jesus as God was God in all fullness and God as all fullness was in Christ. Hence, a reference to Jesus is a reference to both the persons Jesus and Trinitarian God, of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND GOD**

Each person, through free will and talents given by grace, is a unique human being who has the right to be different and have a different relationship to and perception of God. Martin Buber in his dialectic of "I" and "thou" raised relatedness to the level of ontology. To Buber "I" is not the subject of nor is "thou" the object of "I", as "I" and "thou" are both co-derivatives of a relationship. Therefore, God and the person relate in an open relationship of love. The difference of course is that God's love is absolute, whereas the person has a relative understanding of love, which through free will can be exercised as chosen by him.

## **THE RESPONSE TO GOD'S CALL**

A person is defined by Zizoulas as "not subject to norms and stereotypes; it cannot be classified in any other way; its uniqueness is absolute. This means that only a Person is free in the true sense"<sup>15</sup>. The person thus defined has since Christ been called by God through Christ to grow in spirit and truth to him. Sakharov makes it plain that:

A genuine theological process has revelation 'from above' as its starting point: the intellect can only theologize on the basis of the given revelation<sup>16</sup>

Sakharov further points out that it is this revelation that determines the task of theology which has as its only function to render the universal truth to be understood today.

## **A THEOLOGIAN**

A theologian can be described as a receptor which relies for communication upon the transmission from God. The extent that the receptor is prepared to fine tune for clearer reception will determine the clarity of the transmission. This poor analogy serves to demonstrate the constancy and consistency for the absolute love of God as transmitter and transmission which knocks on the heart of the recipient and awaits admission. The risk taken by God is that his creature will not open the door. God has shown his unconditional love by creating and sustaining man and the world. Further, by sending his son, who by descending to earth allowed man to ascend to heaven, thus affording an opportunity for theosis to mankind. Further, through the Spirit, by establishing the church and its sacraments, he makes plain the way to salvation. Whether that happens

depends on whether each person is prepared to respond. To the extent that they do they begin to theologise.

Meyendorff states that:

the true theologian was the one who saw and experienced the content of his theology; and this experience was considered to belong not to the intellect alone (although the intellect was not excluded from its perception) but to the 'eyes of the spirit' which places the whole man - intellect, emotions and even senses - in contact with divine existence<sup>17</sup>

Although a theologian acts as a receptor, understanding of what is received depends on the insight and synthesis that each person applies to express the immediate encounter of the "truth within the Tradition of the Church". This tradition Lossky refers to as:

the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church communicating to each member of the body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the truth in the Light which belongs to it and not according to the natural light of human reason.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, as human understanding matures through the Holy Spirit, God's grace and illumination grows within. This is equally applicable to the Church Fathers who required five ecumenical councils from the years 431AD to 787AD to specifically deal with aspects of the divine and human natures of Christ, who is the same "yesterday, today and tomorrow". This revelation from God is hampered only by the extent of our capacity to understand which capacity is driven by nostalgia.

This idea of the pain conjoined with the notion of re-living means, like the Prodigal Son, a return to the Father who is seeking us out in the first place. Hence, Theology seeks to make us children of God through the Son and in the Holy Spirit by adopting us as sons of God.

## **OUR RESPONSE**

"The one who prays is a theologian and the one who is a theologian prays". Thus, Evagrius of Pontes placed prayer as the centre of theology. This, upon reflection, must be so. Prayer is communication, it expresses what you are and how you feel. It opens up and fine tunes the receptor, as the desire is to ensure clarity of the message. Notwithstanding, God knows your needs before you formulate them. It is a human

characteristic to collect and voice thoughts as clear as possible. This human fine tuning simultaneously enhances reception of God's grace which in turn through increasing nostalgia further clarifies the human response to God and thus to understanding and towards theosis.

What underpins prayer in Faith? Eudokimov stated:

Faith is a dialogue, but the voice of God is almost silent. It erects a pressure that is infinitely delicate and never irresistible. God does not give orders. He issues invitations"<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, despair may arise because of the perception that prayer remains unanswered. This raises the issue about how long is one prepared to continue to pray to God that does not appear to listen. It is how this "failure" to have prayers answered "on demand" is responded to that is the measure of the person. If supplication to God is rejected, a person may then turn towards self-centredness and self-reliance. At that point, an existentialist view begins to set in and the person begins to say there is no God. This falling away into apostasy is initiated when man begins to change his role from receptor to quasi transmitter.

If, on the other hand, the response is to remain faithful, then the Church provides sustenance through the Eucharist. This gift "par excellence" continues to nourish the person whilst at the same time allowing the person to share in salvation through the Church. This allows time for the human to gain understanding of his supplication and hear the "delicate voice of God" talking to him.

## **THEOLOGY AS ACTION**

What good is my growth to God if it is for my salvation only? Whatever my talents may be if I use them only for myself, am I not like the person who hides his talents in fear of his Master?<sup>20</sup> Does not my growth also include growth in responsibility to help my fellow man, who is as unique and as precious as I to God, and to raise them to see what I see of the wonder of God?

"Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead"<sup>21</sup>. There is clearly a time for the theologian to act as did Philip to explain to those seeking understanding.<sup>22</sup> There is also a time to act in accordance with faith, just as there is a time to participate in the many parts of the Church according to ability, as all effort is worthy before God.

But the responsibility of being in Christ does not stop at the Church door. It extends to all aspects of life. The Earth is sacred and as part of creation is under the dominion of man. Thus, if my neighbour is without, then my response is clear; Abraham tithed Melchizedek<sup>23</sup>, and St John the Baptist proposed sharing equally.<sup>24</sup> Jesus, however, proposed to his followers to give all and follow him. Christianity is thus not a sterile cerebral exercise. It is life actuated and vivified here and now. God's plan is gradually being revealed and we are slowly moving towards obtaining some perspective. If we fail to understand God's plan, then we are as seed that falls on barren ground, and whatever our initial interest, it cannot be sustained and will die. Thus, whether we choose to open our eyes to see and thus become fertile ground is our choice for which we individually take responsibility.

Theology is not easy, it is a constant task with the goal not getting nearer during our lifetime. The more we grow in understanding, the further the need to move towards God becomes clearer. As we mature spiritually from milk to solid food, discernment begins to grow. Climacus places discernment as the apex of the higher virtues of the active life. To him "discernment is – and is recognised to be a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things and is found only among those who are pure in heart, in body and in speech"<sup>25</sup>.

Thus one begins to see distinctions where none were before. Moral equivalence begins to creep in if we cannot discern the will of God. It is evil to kill – yet it may be justified to kill in certain circumstances. The Church Fathers such as St. Athanasius referred to the morality of killing as being determined by time and conditions. Therefore, as understanding grows what was once black and white is now seen in various shades of grey. To discern this correct shade of grey is the role of the human response as it approaches theosis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Growing in God and being a theologian is a very rocky road. There clearly is a time for learning to listen, and through listening growing in understanding. However, at some point understanding dictates action. God's grace makes for a restlessness to better serve God. God is no longer viewed as apart but within. Like lovers God and Man become more and more drawn into one. At that point, this love demands expression

– it cannot be hidden but must be put like a lamp on a hill. Love demands to be sung from the rooftops. The problem is that not everybody is interested in this song. People who are disinterested become suspicious. Notwithstanding, this love further willingly compels you to act. You are in love with your creator. To join Him is your ultimate goal. As St Paul said "For me to live in Christ and to die is gain"<sup>26</sup>. At that point, it can be said that you are truly listening and that you are moving to be one with Christ. Thus, the basis for theology is the love of God, and how we respond to that call. As the epigram makes clear, God reveals and we respond to his love, and through our respective abilities, express our gratitude and love at his magnificence towards mankind.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matins Prayer

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:23

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:23-27

<sup>4</sup> Ex 20-21

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 1:22-23

<sup>6</sup> Heb 1:1

<sup>7</sup> Jn 1:17-18

<sup>8</sup> V Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*. Translated I & H Kesarcadi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: SYS Press, 1979)

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 15:14-15

<sup>10</sup> Gen 1:26

<sup>11</sup> Mark 8:36-37

<sup>12</sup> Gen 4

<sup>13</sup> V Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*. Translated I & H Kesarcadi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: SYS Press, 1979)

<sup>14</sup> Gal 2:9

<sup>15</sup> John Zizioulas. *Communion and Othemess*. SVTQ 38 (1994) P 358

<sup>16</sup> H V Sakharov. *I Love Therefore I Am*. (Crestwood, NY: SYS Press, 2002) P41

<sup>17</sup> John Meyendorff. *Byzantine Theology - Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. (Fordham University Press, 1979) P9

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Lossky. *In the Image And Likeness of God*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974) P152

<sup>19</sup> P Eudokimov. *Ages of Spiritual Life*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998) P50-51

<sup>20</sup> Matt. 25:14-30

<sup>21</sup> Jas 2:7

<sup>22</sup> Acts 8:30-35

<sup>23</sup> Gen 14:20

<sup>24</sup> Luke 3:11

<sup>25</sup> J Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Missionary, (Soc. of St Paul, 1982) P229

<sup>26</sup> Phil 1:22

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