

# *On Orthodox Gnosiology*

Sub-Dn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian

In order to have genuine *gnosis* one must also have *charisma* and be illuminated by God's grace. This grace transfigures or transforms our intelligence. Since what we contemplate is a personal existence and presence, "true *gnosis* implies encounter, reciprocity, faith as a personal adherence to the personal presence of God Who reveals Himself" (*Orthodox Theology*, Vladimir Lossky, 13). In the ascetical Eastern Christian tradition, *gnosis* is the summit of the prayer life. According to the great Father and ascetic Evagrius, it is something given by God to the man who, knows himself to be fallible and "works to transform what he lacks, through an unfolding of faith" (*ibid*, 13). Evagrius also states: "The one who has purity in prayer is true theologian, and the one who is true theologian has purity in prayer" (*ibid*, 13). This purity also involves silence for the theologian. Such silence was known and observed by the Hesychasts (the "silents"). Such silence to enter *gnosis*, demands the conquering and arresting of thought.

The foundation for all theology, just as for iconography, is the Incarnation of the Word. "Since the Word has incarnated Himself, the Word can be thought and taught, and in the same way the Word can be painted" (*ibid*, 13). The goal of the incarnation was to bring us to the Father, in the Spirit. Theology necessarily becomes *gnostic* through contemplation and silence. Through this contemplation and silence we open our minds to a reality which transcends it. We are thus "seized, mortified and vivified" by such contemplative faith (*Orthodox Theology*, 14). Lossky explains that the difference between *gnosis* and *episteme* stating, "theological teaching locates itself with difficulty between a) *gnosis*: charisma and silence, contemplative and existential knowledge -and b) *episteme*: science and reasoning" (*ibid*, 14). Even though theology uses *episteme* (knowledge), it can't be allowed to be reduced to this. Theology must lift the spirit towards contemplation, where ultimately prayer is purified of thoughts and goes on to the ineffable. As Lossky writes, "Gnosis as contemplation is an exit to the state of a future age, a vision of what is beyond history, of what completes history, a projection of eschatology into the instant" (*ibid*, 14). This silence, according to St. Isaac the Syrian, represents the language of the future age.

Although theological teaching must be adapted to different times and cultures, it must never lose its close contemplative aspect. Through eschatological silence nourished with contemplation, theology continues to attempt to express the inexpressible and ineffable. At the same time we must beware of theological thought because it can become a hindrance if it is over-indulged in. Until our intellect reaches pure-prayer it remains confined. Rather than theological thought becoming a form of mental escape or flight, it must instead dispose to praise and contemplation. Theology must be praise and likewise dispose us to the praise of God. This is why some of the Eastern Churches' greatest theologians were also great hymnographers, e.g., Sts. Ephraim (Syrian), Gregory the Theologian (Byzantine), John of Damascus (Byzantine), Gregory of Narek (Armenian), Nersess Shnorhali (Armenian) and Simeon the New Theologian (Byzantine).

A balance must be sought in taught theology between that which is "unutterable" as St. Paul heard when he was taken up to the "third heaven" (representing the Uncreated and Divine) and simple *episteme*, which remains a constant temptation for the theologian (*Orthodox*

*Theology*, Lossky, 15). The key to finding this balance is found in *sophia* or wisdom, which is the human and "inspired skill of the craftsman and the artist" (*ibid*, 15). *Sophia*, as translated by the Septuagint, represents the Hebrew term meaning "Divine Wisdom as God's perfect technique in His work" (*ibid*, 15). *Sophia* then is united with *economia* to form a certain prudence or *phronesis*. Thus *gnosis* and *episteme* are connected and balanced through *sophia*. Yet Lossky warns that a theology which must be placed into a system is always a danger because it imprisons "in the enclosed sphere of thought the reality to which it must open thought" (*ibid*, 15).

For St. Paul, knowledge of God is understood in terms of a personal relationship manifested through reciprocity. This reciprocity is both with God (the object and subject of theology) as well as with those to whom the theology is addressed (*ibid*, 15, 16). At its best it results in communion. Theology begins with revelation initiated by God but also requires a free human response of love and faith. Christian faith begins with certitude because what it seeks (*i.e.*, God) is already present, making possible our faith. Faith enables true intelligence. Through faith knowledge is granted to us by adhering and participating in God who reveals Himself to us (*ibid*, 16). As Lossky states, "Faith as ontological participation included in a personal meeting is therefore the first condition for theological knowledge" (*ibid*, 17).

Through *sophia*, the theologian must adapt his thoughts to revelation, to find words which bear witness to that revealed truth. As Lossky writes, "It is a matter of the internal reconstruction of our faculties of knowing, conditioned by the presence in us of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid*, 17). St. John witnesses in his first epistle, "the anointing you have received from Him remains in you and you have no need to be taught... and his anointing teaches you concerning all things..." (1 Jn 2:20, 27). This anointing through Holy Chrism represents the presence of the Holy Spirit. We cannot be taught the truth unless this presence, which opens our minds to God's knowledge, is already within us. Thus "the Christian knows all, but theology is necessary to actuate this knowledge (*Orthodox Theology*, Lossky, 17)." Jeremiah the Prophet, witnessed to this knowledge which is given through the Spirit of God (31:33-34).

Theology only makes sense to those who are of faith because "it is based on the interior evidence of the truth in the Spirit, on the teaching of the truth by the truth itself" (*ibid*, 18). As St. Augustine wrote, "Where His anointing is absent, external words assail the ears to no purpose." No one has the exclusive prerogative of teaching in the Church. The same spirit which inspires the one who teaches must also be present in the one who listens and learns. We must all witness to the truth. Faith through a new relationship with God makes our intellect bear fruit.

The incarnation both reveals and constitutes revelation. Through it God speaks to us through His Son. Theology is expressed by means of the incarnation. Theology is the opposite of speculation because it begins with a fact, *i.e.*, revelation. As Lossky states, "For the theologian, the point of departure is Christ, and it is also the point of arrival" (*ibid*, 18). The philosopher gets to an idea from another idea or from generalized facts in accord with an idea. For some philosophers in their search for God approach this from an inherent necessity: God must exist in order for their idea of the universe to be reasonable. As a result they seek arguments to prove God's existence. Theological approach is very different. Since God has revealed Himself to us... our whole thought and approach should be a response to this fact; it should conform to this revelation known through faith (*Orthodox Theology*, Lossky, 20). Philosophers construct an idea of God. For the theologian God is the one Who reveals Himself and cannot be known outside of this revelation.

The only way to know this personal God, to receive Him in a total encounter, is to open oneself to Him. This is the only way to truly know Him. The abstract and impersonal God of the philosophers is but a reflection in human thought of the personal God. Yet starting from this reflection, it is impossible to know the real God (*ibid*, 20). Lossky explains that this is because, “the procedure of faith is necessary, fundamental, and primordial (20).” Therefore only if one begins with faith can philosophy be saved. Without faith, philosophy “ends in a mysticism and dies in becoming the experience of an Unknown God Who can no longer even be named” (*ibid*, 21).

Theology must bear witness that the transcendence of God is revealed in the immanence of His Son’s Incarnation. Immanence is implicit in the very notion of revelation yet in this God reveals Himself to be transcendent (*ibid*, 21). Yet in Christian theology God must be understood as beyond all philosophical transcendence. While creation is recognized as a free act of God’s will, it must equally be recognized that God could just as easily not created the world (*ibid*, 22). Whereas in Platonism God was understood as the principle of everything and that from which everything develops -without ontological break or division, for Christians emanationism is impossible because “the ontological break [between God and creation] is total; creation *ex nihilo* is free” (*ibid*, 22).

Thus God remains radically transcendent by nature, even in the immanence of His manifestation (*Orthodox Theology*, Lossky, 23). This is why the apophatic (or negative) approach to theology was adopted by Christian theologians. The living God is beyond being and non-being. He is beyond all concepts including that of becoming. Lossky writes, "Thought must go beyond itself to approach Him - without naming Him" (23). The only natural theology for a Christian is to "grasp Him by not grasping and to know Him by not knowing" (*ibid*, 23). Simply stated, one cannot put God within a concept -even that of essence. This is what is meant by "learned ignorance." Lossky summarizes this by stating, “This mystery of faith as personal encounter and ontological participation is the unique foundation of theological language, a language that apophysis opens to the silence of deification” (*ibid*, 25).

Thus to have genuine *gnosis* the theologian must also have *charisma* and be illuminated by God’s grace in order for his intelligence to become transfigured. The theologian must have purity and silence which is the conquering and arresting of thoughts. He must also find a balance between *gnosis* and *episteme* a balance that is reached through *sophia* united with *economia* to form a certain prudence or *phronesis*. Theology must be based on the certitude of revelation and the Incarnation of the Word rather than on speculation. The knowledge of God is a result of a personal relationship manifested through reciprocity. Theology proceeds from faith and is only understood through faith. Through silence and contemplation, theology may attempt to express the inexpressible and ineffable. As long as it never loses its close contemplative aspect theological teaching can be adapted to different times and cultures in order to express the same truth of God to all generations.