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Rediscovering the Importance of the Theology of Language in the Contemporary Orthodox Discourse

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Abstract

Orthodox theology, starting with the post-Nicene Fathers, has firmly linked its development to ontological thought, on the basis of which dogmatic theology has been progressively defined and the understanding of the divine economy has been deepened. Ontology, however, presupposes an inseparable relationship with logic on the one hand, and with the theory of language on the other. Since the Middle Ages, the Christian West has given importance to the logical foundation of theology, reinterpreting its ontological foundations, while the theory of language, in its applications to theology, has followed its developments accordingly. Orthodox theology, on the other hand, has developed a theology of language that is functional to the ontological arguments that have recurred in dogmatic debates. A theology of language independent of ontology was never developed in the patristic era. Developments in Orthodox theology over the last two centuries, however, have highlighted the problem of the theological understanding of the linguistic fact, as a result of which, in the 20th century, there have been attempts to define a theology of language. The recovery and development of this reflection sheds light on several problems that contemporary Orthodoxy is called to face, from the crisis of ontology that is rampant not only in secular thought but also in worldview and contemporary customs, to the ecclesiological nominalism that emerges in the background of the ecclesiastical diatribes of the present time.

Keywords: theology of language, onomatodox debate.

Ongoing Scenarios

Reflection on language played a key role in shaping the cultural profile of the 20th century. At the same time, a renewed interest in the issue of language has been raised in Orthodox theology, particularly in early 20th century Russian theology. Theological reflection in this field, however, did not register any subsequent systematic developments, nor did it occupy a special place in subsequent academic interests. This state of the art is possibly due to the fact that the Fathers did not produce a reflection specifically devoted to the nature of language, contrary to what they did in the fields of ontology and logic.

It is my intention to propose, in the following pages, a short reflection on the role of language in relation to some of the areas that are at the centre of the debate in contemporary Orthodox theology: from the theology of personhood to neo-patristics, from the challenges of trans-humanist secularism to the problems of ecclesiology, from the advancing role of technology to the role of man in the preservation of the cosmos. The approach that I will follow will finally bring problems to light rather than suggest solutions, while emphasising the value that a theological reflection on the nature of language could cast new light on considering these thematic areas and the problems related to them.

Linguistic Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy and Artificial Languages

Contemporary philosophy has been marked by the importance that the reflection on language has assumed in a wide variety of fields. From the developments of scientific linguistics fostered by De Saussure, Jakobson, and Chomsky, to philosophical speculation on the nature of language and its relation to Being pursued by philosophers such as Heidegger, Cassirer, and Jaspers,¹ not to mention the linguistic turn undertaken in the domains of philosophical hermeneutics and structuralism, which had repercussions in the most diverse domains of knowledge, the language-based paradigm has assumed a predominant position in orienting thought: "In both structuralism and hermeneutics, language is seen as an autonomous, suprapersonal entity capable of dominating speakers."²

¹ See Robins 1967; Rorty 1992.

² D'Agostini 1997, 140. According to this scholar it is possible to acknowledge four main paths in the linguistic thought of the last century: 1) the neo-Kantian, phenomenological-existential

The linguistic perspective in the 20th century has replaced metaphysics, reinterpreting the latter as both a theory of formal representation of concepts and a theory of the subject, which, by virtue of its inner life, cannot be reduced to the objective parameters of the physical world. This paradigm led to investigating the role of linguistic patterns in thinking processes, claiming that the epistemic foundation of thought relied on linguistic structures.

Nonetheless, the dominant epistemic position kept by the language began soon to be submitted to criticism. According to phenomenology, the suspension of the categorial comprehension of the reality, which is proper to the faculty of the intellect, also entails the suspension of language. The reflection on the pre-categorial and the pre-linguistic knowledge marked then the overcoming of the positivistic conception of the language according to its capability to fully encompass the reality.

Finally, we have to take a look at computer languages, which are showing the power of language in creating virtual realities in which all aspects of human life tend to be progressively incorporated. The digital revolution involves a qualitative upgrade of the utilisation of technology, which no longer consists in the transformation of the forces of nature, based on the analogy between natural energies and the work (*ἔργον*) that is exposed, but rather consists in the translation and definition into the machine language of the energy and the *ergon*. If we consider analogy as a natural mimetic principle, we may conclude that imitation is no longer natural and analogical, but rather a non-analogical and artificial representation relying on artificial languages handled by algorithms.

Nowadays, the so-called Artificial Intelligence (AI) exploits the manipulation of language through digital technologies and is oriented at an appropriate imitation that is meant to define new parameters for what should be conceived as real, no matter on what has been known as real or natural until now. The need to retranslate procedures and artefacts that were perfectly functional in their pre-digital form – such, for instance, as thermometers or kitchen balances – into digital languages is not only a matter originating in the economy of industrial production, but a matter of an evolution responding to the metaphysical need to duplicate the existing technologies with technologies controlled through artificial languages.

and hermeneutic trend; 2) structuralism and poststructuralism; 3) the neo-positivistic, Popperian and post-positivistic epistemological trend; 4) the properly “analytic” current, with variants: philosophers of ideal and ordinary language, referentialists and anti-referentialists, constructionists and descriptivists, theorists of “dissolution” and “solution”; see D’Agostini 1997, 156.

Orthodox Theology and the Issue of Language

During the 20th century, Orthodox theology has been called at its turn to deal with the issue of language. What generated this interest is a concrete episode that gave life to a harsh controversy, the affair of the movement of the so-called “name-worshippers” (ὀνοματοδόξοι/ὀνοματολάτρεις, имяславцы/имеславцы).³ This movement began in 1907 at the Athonite monastery of St Panteleimon, the *Rossikon*, on the occasion of the publication of a book by the monk Hilarion Domratchev (1845–1916), titled *On the Mountains of the Caucasus* (*На горахъ Кавказа*). This book was an account of the eremitic life that its author led on the mountains of Abkhazia, while being focused on the Jesus Prayer: it was a report of ascetic life like many others, except for its claim to expose a “new and not yet revealed dogma,” whose formulation is articulated as “the name of God is God Himself.” This claim immediately met harsh criticism, but also the defence of devout supporters. The affair grew up until it resulted in its condemnation by the Holy Synod of Constantinople, and finally by the Russian Synod, as “onomatolatri,” which led, in a belligerent *crecendo*, to the military deportation of the Onomatodox monks from the *Rossikon* in 1914.⁴

However, the theological protagonist in this affair was not its initiator, Fr Hilarion, who soon withdrew from the polemic and retired to hesychast life, but the Russian hieromonk Antoniy Boulatovich (1870–1919), who tried to provide this doctrine with a theological justification. Boulatovich spread his works in Russia, finding as interlocutors, among the others, Michail Novoselov and Pavel Florensky. By the former Boulatovich was invited to rethink the Onomatodox doctrine in the light of Palamite theology, transposing the distinction between essence and energies into the distinction between the Un-named name (неименуемое имя), corresponding to the essence, and named names (именуемые имена), corresponding to the energies or attributes.⁵

Nonetheless, the problem of internal distinctions in the divine nature was not grasped by Boulatovich, who lacked a solid theological education, since he insisted on defending the original and principal Onomatodox viewpoint, stating that “in the named attributes we have the whole essence of

3 For the reconstruction of the onomatodox debate and its doctrinal implications see Nivière 2015. For the denominations of this movement, see pages 17–18.

4 Nivière 2015, 79–84.

5 Nivière 2015, 280.

God.”⁶ He also acknowledged a hypostatic value to the divine names, conceiving them at the same time as energies. In some ways this hypostatisation of the name of God is reminiscent of the more heterodox aspects of Russian sophiology.⁷

It was indeed in the circle of the last generation of Russian sophiologists where Onomatodox theories aroused interest, sympathy, and developments. Pavel Florensky, who also was among Boulatovich’s interlocutors, wrote on the meaning of language on several occasions, pursuing a Neoplatonic linguistic approach. This recognised language as the expression of the idea, thus arriving at problematic formulations such as the affirmation of the “magical value of the word” or, in relation to the Onomatodox issue, such as the statement that “The divine name is God, but God is not the name.”⁸ Fr Sergei Bulgakov, in his turn, in the wake of the resonance that the controversy raised in Russia, felt the need to reflect on the nature of language in several of his writings, the most notable of which was the book *The Philosophy of Name and Verb*.⁹

The Issue of Language and the Theology of Personhood

It is remarkable to note that a debate on language involving theological themes had developments only in the context of Russian religious philosophy. It was raised in the pre-revolutionary period, continued scholarly in the diaspora, and received attention in contemporary scholarship mainly from Russian scholars. In contrast to other themes that have emerged in the theological debate during the 20th century, as for instance the theology of personhood, which received contributions from different areas of Orthodoxy, the linguistic issue has remained confined to one specific cultural area, very likely due to the controversy it caused. This aspect is reminiscent of the case of sophiology.¹⁰ The main explanation comes perhaps from the fact that this

6 Nivière 2015, 280.

7 Plested 2022, 58–69.

8 Nivière 2015, 293. In the years 1920–1922 Florensky wrote a series of essays that he intended to collect in a volume titled *Мысль и язык* (*Thought and language*). This appeared, however, only posthumously in 1990. One of these essays was titled “The magical value of the word;” see Florensky 2003.

9 Bulgakov 1991.

10 Plested 2022, 13–23.

polemic and its developments failed to systematically return to the patristic tradition, and remained confined in the ambiguities of idealistic philosophy, since it was not aimed at a clear theological purpose, in contrast to what happened in the case of the theology of personhood.

The theological debate on personhood has not failed to focus on the Fathers, especially on the Cappadocians, as can be seen in the interpretations of the late Metropolitan of Pergamon, John (Zizioulas), and generated a comparative debate on the developments in the Byzantine and Latin traditions, arriving to the fruitful outcome of delineating the ecclesial being of man under the perspective of personhood.¹¹ By the way, the return to the Fathers acted not only as a mere methodological appeal, but entailed a general focus on personhood broadened to many aspects of the Orthodox tradition (ontology, ecclesiology etc.), approached far from abstract and systematic pretensions, but relying on the living ecclesial experience, of which the Fathers were interpreters.¹²

The theology of personhood responded in a certain way to the spirit of the time that predominated a century ago. That spirit was characterised by an anthropological vision based on collectivisation and the Promethean intoxication of the massive technological transformation of human life. In the face of the immanentist soteriology of the ideologies of collectivisation and the pan-economicist and productivist struggle of the industrial society, ignited by the clash of social forces in rivalry for the conquest of secular glorification and social hegemony, relying on the contrast between profit and salary, Orthodox theology has turned its gaze to the personal soteriology of the Gospel, whereby Christ did not come to serve the rights of groups, nor to save social classes, but human persons.¹³

Today, the collectivisation of social life is no longer the result of the atheism outlined by the ideological vision advocated by the outcomes of Hegelian dialectic, as in the early 20th century, according to its positivist or Marxist versions, but it is the product of the reversal of the relationship between man and technology. This relationship is firstly submitted to the correspondence between language and truth; consequently a theological reflection on the relational power of language is nowadays most welcome in order to under-

11 Russell 2003; Chiappetti 2021.

12 See my other paper "Neopatristic Synthesis between Unity and Identity in Orthodox Theology" in this same volume.

13 See Mounier 1989.

stand the challenges that are raised by secularism, on the one hand, and post-secular ideologies that appeal to the religious language, on the other. Both have shifted from the evangelical way that preaches the salvation of persons of good will in respect of their spiritual freedom, leading to a religious misunderstanding of salvation as a neo-Manichean division between people on the basis of ideologies, ethnicity, and genres.

Technology, Language, and Beauty

Technology, from being a tool available to men to fulfil the divine commandment to “work the ground” (Gen 2:5, 3:23), has become an instrument aimed at transforming man in the name of a purported prosperity to come. In recent decades, an epochal shift has emerged, leading from man transforming the world by means of technology to technology transforming man, challenging his innermost ontological self-comprehension by advocating trans-ontologies, which are the premise of trans-humanism and gender ideology.¹⁴ Hence, we may perceive the importance of recovering the theological rationale of language in order to understand the epochal transformations of our time. We shall move from considering what kind of link subsists between technology and language.

Technology is pursuing of the commandment given to man in the beginning to take care, cultivate, and keep the Paradise of delights, a commandment that has maintained its validity even after the fall (Gen 3:23). The commandment to “tend and keep” the “garden of Eden” (Gen 2:15) enshrines both the role of technology and language. Technology is what changes the relation between words and things. Technology transforms things, while the word keeps them. By its transforming power technology brings things to being something else, and this is a prerogative of all of the living beings by virtue of their ability to transform things through their organs: jaws, fingers, lungs, stomach, physiological processes etc.

In Genesis 2:19, God brings all the animals to Adam to see what name he would give them. Adam’s name-giving shows his synergic role in the work of God, by manifesting the proper identity of the species created by God through spoken words. Through names Adam manifests the technical skill

¹⁴ See Smyrniaios 2016; Mainoldi 2024.

of each animal and at the same time establishes his pastoral relationship with them, making them participants in the transformation of the world under his leadership as their name-giver and shepherd.

The cosmic function of the soul is to participate in this transformation: animated beings transform the created being of things, while God alone brings things from non-being into being, according to their predefined *logos*. Every technique has been given to living beings as imitation of the divine energies within creation. However, if all animals have their proper technical skill and their transforming power, man alone, by virtue of language, has the power to keep the being of things that are no longer or are not yet.

Technology, consequently, derives its ontological rationale and its ethical justification from its participation in the providential order that governs the cosmos, established according to the divine *logoi*. What keeps technology in the order of God's providential good, and guards the balance between word and technology, is *beauty*. Beauty is the energy of God that makes the *logos* of every individual being shine in the union of form and matter, according to its *proprium*, identity, and limits.

The Role of Language in the Contemporary Spiritual Crisis

Expressing beauty is consequent to the capability of maintaining the equilibrium between the word that preserves and the technology that transforms. The difficulty, if not the inability, that the current global technological civilisation encounters in expressing beauty in most contexts appears as one of the main symptoms of the ongoing spiritual crisis that features our time, whose ultimate cause can be identified in the loss of the role of beauty in harmonising the relationship between word and technology.¹⁵

The neglect of beauty as the ultimate goal of art and technology entails the removal of the notion of limit as an inescapable ontological condition. The spiritual and psychological attitude expressed by the culture and arts of our time consequently ignore the human responsibility to keep and wisely transform the world according to the divine mandate. This leads to concealing the beauty of natural models, which are the product of the divine Wisdom. The buzzwords of our time finally justify the removal of the notion of limit and natural order itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ On the impact of technology on arts in current post-modern cultural trends see Rigopoulou 2024.

¹⁶ See also Stoyadinov 2024.

Ultimately, the current spiritual crisis is fostered by the distorted and seductive use of words, manifesting a misleading conception about the responsibility of man in keeping peace and equilibrium in the creation according to respect towards its natural beauty. The understanding of the truth of things can only be born out of truthful words, which only divine revelation and the guidance of the Holy Spirit can inspire in man.

Nevertheless, the current crisis does not only involve the loss of the paradigm of beauty in the realm of artistic creation and technological production, but also a subtle crisis of the *episteme*, marked by the demise of the worldview based on scientific knowledge on nature. Words are in fact no longer an instrument of the classical scientific logic, based on the principle that what is natural is objective and defines the reality on the basis of the knowledge of natural limits of beings and things. Logic is no longer used to describe the cosmos and to depict a scientific rationale of the immanent world, but rather is devoted to the abusive affirmation of a project of transforming the cosmos. The main focus of this is on the trans-humanist project.¹⁷

Delving into the Theological and Ontological Rationale of Language

The word is the manifestation of hypostatic relationships, through which the energies of the essence are directed according to the will of rational natures (where 'rational' means λογικός, that is endowed with speech). As the divine Word is the revelation of the love of the Father out of the mystery of His hypostasis without beginning, the uncreated *logoi* are the divine wills kept by the divine Logos, instantiating a hypostatic relationship between the Logos and all created beings. Accordingly, the divine *logoi* are the means of the relationship between God and all of the creatures, whose uncreated *logoi* are brought into being by the divine energies, which are the names of God – revealed in His operation *ad extra*. In rational creatures, words are the result of their being created in the image of God, and consequently they are the means of their hypostatic relationship with God and with all other beings. Finally, the spoken or written word constitutes the external dimension – both in form and matter – of the manifestation of the ontological relationship between those endowed

¹⁷ Gallaher 2019; Mainoldi 2024.

with speech and the divine *logoi*. This manifestation takes shape through linguistic morphology and the physical medium through which it is articulated.

Based on these assumptions, human speech manifests and creates relationships. The word owes its power not to its form or sound, but to the fact that it is relational. Divine creation proceeds in fact from the divine pronunciation of the words by which God establishes the *ousiai* of every created being, which are the uttered output of a bundle of unuttered *logoi*, as we can learn from St Maximus the Confessor.¹⁸

The Fathers and the Theology of Language

A thorough re-examination of the efforts made by Orthodox theologians during the last century around the issue of language that would also embrace patristic reflection on language from an in-depth theological perspective – and not merely a documentary or anthological one – has yet to be done.

The Fathers had no need to construct systematic reflections on the argumentative tools that they employed in creating their theological discourse, such as a theory of language or ontology. But this does not mean that the Fathers would not have had theoretical insights into these fields, even if unsystematically, while exploiting words and concepts for the needs of their theological argumentation, especially with the purpose of apologetics.

The Fathers not only had no need to build a systematic theory of language and ontology, but on the contrary they understood the risk of such a task, since every theorisation outside of theological discourse would have led to a metaphysical understanding of the world independent of Revelation, and they would have headed back to the attempts made by philosophers of antiquity to build a rational, systematic, and auto-sufficient theory of the whole.¹⁹ For the Fathers ontology did not constitute a structure of reality, and ontological language cannot by itself explain the structure of reality (as it is, for example, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*). Nonetheless, ontology was a suitable language for describing the output of God's creative energies without exhausting the mystery of the creation as revelation of God's will.

¹⁸ See Valiavitcharska 2021, 374–377, 384.

¹⁹ For the Patristic and Byzantine discussions on the nature of the *logos* and on uttered/unuttered language see Panaccio 2017, 28–57; Valiavitcharska 2021.

Just as the Fathers used ontological concepts to deepen their understanding of the theological truth without being aimed at a systematic treatment of these concepts, so they did not develop a theology of language either, although they developed arguments based on the theological understanding of the role of language. The earliest steps of theology in the apostolic age moved forward from the tropological exegesis of the divine names as documented in the Scriptures.²⁰ Nothing less systematic can be conceived, but an in-depth analysis of the use of divine names in Scriptures shows evidence of a structured theological thought expressed through non-systematic narrative.

Speculative theology from Nicaea onward, entering into the golden age of patristics, intertwined ontology and theology of language, leaving aside the epistemological concern about these disciplines that were exploited as tools for the theological argumentation. The most important outcome of that trend was the theology of the divine names elaborated by the Cappadocian Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as the theory of the *logoi* that was developed by Maximus the Confessor, developing on pseudo-Dionysian teaching.²¹

Apophaticism and the impossibility to speak out the divine mysteries, often emphasised as the flagship of Orthodox theology, should not make us forget the divine gift of the speech that enables theology to speak the truth and the liturgical word to be efficacious. Dionysius the Areopagite, after the most radical apophatic statement in which he affirmed that “no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being. There is no name for it nor expression.” He also affirms that the possibility of truly speaking of the divine realities is guaranteed, being a gift from God: “So if what I have said is right and if, somehow, I have correctly understood and explicated something of the names of God, the work must be ascribed to the cause of all good things for having given me the words to speak and the power to use them well.”²²

Following Dionysius, Barlaam of Calabria sustained a radical apophatic vision, by distinguishing between knowing things and naming things, and assuming that apodictic knowledge is related to things and not to names. Accordingly, he excluded the possibility of an apodictic knowledge of God, assuming that nothing can be affirmed properly of God. In order to oppose to

²⁰ Cullmann 1963; Dunn 1989.

²¹ Tollefsen 2008, 35–40, 68–81, 157–158.

²² De divinis nominibus, XIII, in Luibheid & Rorem 187, 129–130.

the extreme apophaticist position held by Barlaam, St Gregory Palamas reaffirmed the possibility of predicating the truth about God, acknowledging the ontological implication of language.²³

Recalling that Barlaam's earliest writings were aimed at contrasting Scholastic-Thomistic gnoseology, which admitted the possibility of knowing God's essence,²⁴ we should focus on the historiographic assumption according to which Eastern theology is basically different from Western scholasticism due to its apophatic orientation in theological knowledge. This assumption has led to an overevaluation of apophaticism as the key of Eastern theology, fostering a misleading interpretation of language, due to the gnoseological perspective entailed by apophaticism.²⁵ At the light of the gnoseology based on negation, language is perceived as a sensible and exterior expression of the truth that basically hides it, being supposedly related to an inferior ontological level, a result that is reminiscent of Platonic idealism.

As a matter of fact, the Greek-speaking Fathers adopted a balanced approach to gnoseology grounded on both the apophatic and the cataphatic perspectives, relying on the distinction between *hypostasis*, *ousia*, and energies within God's nature. Gnoseology involved ontology and logics, and was developed through the exploitation of the terminology and the concepts inherited from the philosophical tradition, readapted to the need of outlining the experience of communion with the Triune God and the Incarnated Logos, disclosed in the Church living tradition.²⁶ Nevertheless the polarity between created and Uncreated, which Christian thought acquired from the Biblical revelation, required a new comprehensions of ontology as meontology – or, better said, hyperontology – resorting to apophatic logic, in order to escape onto-theology and adapting to the paradigm of a tri-personal principle, endowed with will, acting by love, and not according to cosmic necessity. This perspective also shaped the methodology of theological argumentation by encompassing the meta-logics of antinomies.²⁷ This development was possible

23 Fyrigos 2005, 82–90.

24 Meyendorff 1974, 76–77, 105.

25 For a historiographical focus and criticism on the hegemony of the apophaticist paradigm in contemporary Orthodox theology, see Kalaïtzidis 2012. For a critical stance on applying a pan-apophatic reading to the most emblematic author of the apophatic tradition, i.e. Pseudo-Dionysius, see Knepper 2014.

26 For the systematic and historiographic framing of these concepts see Tollefsen 2012.

27 For the antinomic character of the Eastern Patristic and Orthodox theological method, see Lossky 1957, 26, 46, 69, 77.

on the basis of the theology of language, since human is gifted of the possibility of rightly speech the truth, not on the basis of a correspondence between language and onto-noetic knowledge, but resorting to his being word-keeper as a consequence of his creation in the image of God.

The Three Ways of Circumscribing Reality through Words According to the Christian Worldview

The three ways of approaching the relationship between knowledge and theological truth can be referred to as the disciplines of ontology, logics, and theology of language. Even if these three ways, as disciplines, are grounded in the terminology and concepts elaborated in the philosophical tradition, they should be understood not as merely self-standing sets of structured knowledge, but as three approaches that allow to understand in different domains the relational and creative power of the word.²⁸

In relation to the function of the word, ontology may be understood as the comprehension of the structure of the world as a product of the divine creative energies, which are the divine names, so that we may affirm that the words-energies reveal the reality spreading light on both its proper and differences and its unique cause. Logics, then, is the definition of the knowledge of the reality according to rules that express its permanent providential order. Finally, theology of language (which should be distinguished from the philosophy of language, which is a discipline that investigates the truth of enunciations) is the understanding, based on revelation, of words and names as uncreated outputs of the divine will, which manifest the creational power of this latter as the true cause of the whole reality.²⁹

These three ways are intertwined but should be kept in their mutual distinction. While ontology and logics can have a non-theological development, in relation to the knowledge of the world, theology of language can be approached only according to the Trinitarian doctrine and Chalcedonian Christology, in order to avoid its reduction to logics or to philosophy of language. In

²⁸ For the philosophical framing of this issue see Macquarrie 1979; Bulgakov 1991; Hallett 2011. Concerning theology of language see Bulgakov 1991; Breck 1996. We may add that while a vast literature on the names of God is available (see Alfeyev 2007, with bibliography), a proper reflection on the nature of language from an Orthodox theological perspective is still to be fully developed.

²⁹ See Lycan 2008; Frede & Inwood (ed.) 2005, 1–13.

its relation to the other two ways, in fact, language constitutes the primordial element, from which the notion of being comes, predicated antinomically to God as super-being, and to created beings as subjected to the laws of necessity, which are to be investigated *a posteriori* by logics.

Relying on Trinitarian theology, language is understood as the means through which revelation allow man to learn the ineffable ways of God's acts of will and His operations. They emerge from the love of the Father, and through the mystery of the divine *ousia* and hypostatic *perichoresis* are directed *ad extra* by the Word of God. It is by virtue of the revealed word that the superontological distinctions in the divine nature – that is, between the three divine hypostases and between the divine *ousia* and the energies – can be affirmed, while the divine nature is always to be understood as ontologically simple. In the domain of Christology, the mystery of the Incarnation is antinomically uttered by the Chalcedonian formula via negative adverbs that define the Incarnation of the Logos in one hypostasis and two natures, but avoid expressing the mysterious mode of this union: “we confess [...] one and the same Christ; Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known [recognised] in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably”.³⁰

Language is the expression of the will and creative power of God, through which He defined the archetypes of all beings as *logoi* in the divine Logos, before bringing them into being. While ontology and logics have a gnoseological purpose aimed at understanding, as far as it is possible for human intellect and language, the divine nature and its operation, the theology of language is not only related to the doctrine of creation by means of conceiving the divine acts of will as *logoi*, but also has major implications in liturgical theology and in ecclesiology, to which I will return later.

According to its essence, language must be approached not just as a tool for describing the dialectical structure of the reality and its ontological counterpart, but as the means by which human will turns into energy and through which man establishes his conditions of existence in the world, exerting his blessed dominion on the physical word (Gen 1:26; 2:15), and creating relations between persons and things. The theology of language helps to understand all of the wide implications of the centrality of the word in human existence, since language is not just a tool developed by human brain during the millennia of his biological evolution, as supposed by the theory of evolution, but is a gift consequent to his creation in the image of God.

30 Need 1996, 47.

Ancient idealistic philosophy tried to construct a metaphysics of the word as manifestation of ideas. This theory, which conceives ideas as ontological archetypes, was overpassed by the Christian conception of the paradigms as divine wills, and divine energies as divine names, always referred to as an enhypostatic transcendent being.³¹ The word never stands on its own, as it must be pronounced by someone, not by a impersonal being but by a personal willing being. According to the Platonist conception, the idea is a noetic entity, self-sufficient and pre-existing, endowed with the causal power to produce emanation of itself.³² No one can utter it or describe the idea according to its essence as it is conceived by the intellect. Instead, the word is *ad extra*, is relational, but at the same time it is *ad intra*, being associated with the divine *logoi*, and having the power of manifesting them.

The Power of the Word

The efficacy of the word uttered by one person relies on the words kept by the memory of the listener. A word in fact evokes a whole series of thoughts and emotions and touches unconscious aspects of the psyche, connected either with spiritual energies or sin. The power that the word has to preserve being is translated into the “solar” – if I may recur to the astronomical metaphor – conscious memory, and counterbalances the “lunar”, unconscious memory, which is related to the non-speaking phases of human life, from the sleep of Adam (Gen 2:21) to the sleep in the mother womb, from the ordinary sleep of the living animated being to the sleep before the resurrection of the dead, a condition which is unnatural and has been caused by the fall of the forefathers. In the sleep state, the word still acts oneirically as a primordial and foundational element of human life, even if it seems to act irrationally and to be ineffective in organising inner life. To the ineffective and corrupted word that is submerged in the subconscious, the spiritual tradition opposes the prayer of the heart, based on the name of Jesus.³³

The divine word only is ontopoietic, while man’s word has ontomimetic and relational power. Human words do not have God’s creative power, but God oversees and legitimises them, as attested in the episode of the naming

31 See Tollefsen 2012, 107.

32 See Tollefsen 2012, 13–31.

33 On the notion of spiritual unconscious, see Larchet 2005.

of animals, which we have recalled above (Gen 2:19). This duality, which encompasses the relationship and the ontological difference between the divine and the human word, is reflected by the eucharist. The Words of Institution (which are a mimesis of Christ's words) reveal a truth that is not yet ontologically realised, i.e. "the Eucharistic bread is the body of Christ," since its profession requires, in order to become ontologically true, divine intervention, invoked through the words of the *epiklesis*. The words that unlock the memorial require the epicletic invocation that, in its turn, re-actualises the eucharistic relationship between God and man by changing the bread into Christ's body: the epiclesis realises the ontological change in the space and time of the particular eucharistic synaxis, while the words of the institution reveal a super-ontological truth, namely that the eternal essence of the Church is eucharistic.³⁴

It is not insignificant to reflect on the Latin tradition that attributes to the Words of Institution the power of changing the bread and the wine into Christ's Body and Blood. This essential aspect of Latin liturgical theology relies on the acknowledgement of the power of the language, where the mimesis of the words pronounced by Christ at the Last Supper under the right ritual conditions is believed to be sufficient to actualise the Eucharist presence. Nonetheless the difference with the Eastern tradition, even if we will not admit a sort of pre-epiclesis in the prayer *Supplices ergo te, Domine, deprecamur* that has been added to the Roman rite,³⁵ we have to recognise that both traditions acknowledge the power of the language in breaking the ordinary ontological dynamics and introducing the external factor, that is the divine operation: in the Latin rite the eternal validity of Christ's institutional words, or, in the Eastern tradition, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the epiclesis. Nevertheless, the epiclesis should be understood as a factor that fully manifests the synergy between the human and the divine word, as a perfect instance of Chalcedonian theology.

The theology of language, finding spiritual witnesses for the efficacy of the word as a theomimetic God-given gift for the purpose of deification in liturgical theology and the Jesus prayer, has the duty to recall the salvific power of the word as synergy between the divine and the human word. The human word has the possibility to evoke the creative and transforming energies of the divine word, whence they are uttered in the spirit of obedience. On the contrary, when human word pretends to possess a content of truth or creative

³⁴ On the sacramental power of the word, see Breck 1996.

³⁵ *Missale Parvum* 1977, 58.

power by itself on behalf of individuals and their secular goals, contrasting to the truth of the real existential conditions, the uttered word become false and generates illusion.

This reminds us of the dialogue in which the serpent seduced the forefathers according to Gen 3:1 (“the serpent [...] said to the woman”). The knowledge of good and evil was indeed introduced on the basis of a preceding not-yet-known duality, that between words of truth and deceit of words. Accordingly, every action undertaken by the devil for the fall of man always moves from *logomachia*, as this was clear to the teachers of the ascetic tradition, who framed the assault of the spiritual enemy as *logismos*.³⁶

***Logomachia* and the Ecclesiological Crisis**

In similar terms, we may reflect on the crisis of ecclesiology that have affected the life of the Church, leading to the historical and still ongoing schisms, and currently affecting worldwide Orthodoxy. Ecclesiological crisis stems from the disavowal of the inseparable link between the words professing the Orthodox faith and the Chalice of the Holy Communion. The deep causes of this state of things can be seen in the loss of the words that should guard the ecclesial being.

Not only the words of the canons of the Holy Councils are no longer observed as binding and epictetic, consequently being destined to become “letter that kills” (2 Cor 3:6), but even the words of the Gospel asking for “mercy” instead of “sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13) are no more bounding for many exponents of the Church, leading to more and more exacerbate jurisdictional conflicts and involvement of the local Churches in secular politics.

Indeed, many members of the Orthodox Church, if not entire areas of Orthodoxy, have still to purify themselves from archaic religious thought, based on sacrificing the other and violent appropriation. This attitude can be exemplified by the schism declared by the Russian Church against the Orthodox Churches that recognise the autocephalous Church in Ukraine, in the pro-war propaganda fostered by the same Russian Church, recurring to a sort of rhetoric remindful of the crusade-language (paired by the silence on this issue kept by many other Orthodox Churches), in the disunion – if not ri-

36 Chryssavgis 2016, 187–190.

valry – between ecclesiastic jurisdictions in the diaspora, which resembles the concurrency between business companies, in widening divisions in the flock of Christ by diffusing superstitions and hate-speech, often declared from the ambo and relaunched worldwide through the Internet.

As in the case of the above-referred crisis of *episteme*, with *logomachia* as its basis, aimed at transforming the reality into a false, unnatural, and demonic world, we constate also hateful *logomachia* at work within Orthodoxy, responding to a trans-ecclesiological project destined to lead to a sort of trans-Orthodoxy in which the words of the Gospel and the Canons are no longer bound to the truth, but rather become the instrument of secular visions, according to which the epiphanic bond between the Church and the divine Logos is definitely lost.

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