

KATAPHASIS AND APOPHASIS IN THE GREEK ORTHODOX PATRISTIC TRADITION

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Introduction

One of the main characteristic features of the theology of the Church Fathers, when they refer to the meaning of God, to His relation to the world or even to their divine experiences, is the kataphatic and apophatic way, in which they describe them. And that is because the distinction between the uncreated God and the created world does not constitute for the Fathers merely just an ontological distinction, which they accept without realizing the direct and deeper gnoseological consequences and implications of it. And the most imminent gnoseological consequence of this ontological distinction is that, although the uncreated God is truly related to the created world through His energies and becomes known by them during their manifestation in the Creation and in History, however, in His essence, in the nature and the way of His energies, as well as in the way of His existence as a Trinity of Persons, He remains completely transcendental and unapproachable. In this sense, God is, for the Fathers, at the same time, known and unknown, explicit and ineffable, revealed and hidden, “Deus revelatus” and “Deus absconditus” or “Deus secretus” and “Deus publicus”, as the holy Augustine would characteristically say.¹

These two gnoseological aspects of God have formed the basis on which the Fathers built two different and seemingly contrary theological routes: the kataphatic and the apophatic one. The kataphatic route or kataphatic theology, as it is usually called, refers to the approachable, understood and known aspect of God, while the apophatic route or apophatic theology refers to the unapproachable, incomprehensible and unknown aspect of Him. The development of these two theological routes is closely connected to the thriving of the patristic theology and characterizes almost all the great Fathers of the Church. But those who especially developed these two theological routes and accented their importance for the essence itself and for the content of theology, in general, are mainly the Cappadokian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, John Damascenus, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregorius Palamas.

¹ See *In Psalmum LXXIV*, 9, PL 36, 852: “(Deus) ubique secretus est, ubique publicus, quem nulli licet, ut est, cognoscere, et quem nemo permittitur ignorare”. Cf. *In Evangelium Joannis tractatus XIII*, 5, PL 35, 1495: “Omnia possunt dici de Deo, et nihil digne dicitur de Deo”.

a. Meaning and gnoseological significance of kataphatic and apophatic theology

Except the two above distinctions, the distinction between essence and energies of God and the distinction between created and uncreated, which, moreover, constitute fundamental prerequisites of the orthodox theology as a whole, a basic condition, from which the Fathers set out to speak kataphatically and apophatically about God is God's revelation to the world and the knowledge of God as experience in the history of Divine Economy. In other words, the knowledge of God, of which they speak, is not a fruit of an intellectualist meditation, but rather of an existential relationship with God in a course towards purification, enlightenment and perfection of man, so that the knowledge man acquires of God is a personal experience, founded on God's revelation to the world, and not an intellectualist achievement.²

In this sense, man, based on God's revelation as a Trinity of Persons and having experience of the divine energies that are imprinted on the Creation and in History, is able to form a real and positive image of God, rendering to Him various kataphatic divine names that either merely indicate the way of His existence as three divine Persons (hypostatic idioms) or reflect the variety of His energies and thus respond to the reality of the divine nature. Accepting, in this way, the recorded in the Holy Scriptures revelation of God, he calls the Persons of the Holy Trinity "Father", "Son and Word of God" and "Holy Spirit", talking about the birth of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father. Seeing, also, the kindness, the wisdom, the power, the justice and the rest energies of God that are manifested in the Economy, man calls God respectively kind, wise, almighty, just etc. All these divine names or even the pictorial representations that are met in the Holy Scriptures either just indicate the particular way of the three divine Persons' existence or express the diversity of God's relations to the world and, thus, they compose the essence of kataphatic theology. Consequently, kataphatic theology or "kataphasis", as the Fathers often call it, is "the thesis of all (i.e. beings)", that is, the attribution of positive qualities to God that stem from His revelation as a Trinity of Persons and His causal relationship with the world. And this relationship is achieved, as we have said, on the

² See G. D. Martzelos, *Essence and energies of God according to Basil the Great. Contribution to the historico-dogmatic inquiry of the Orthodox Church's teaching about the essence and energies of God* (in Greek), Thessalonica ²1993, pp. 123 ff. N. A. Matsouka, *World, man, society according to Maximus the Confessor* (in Greek), Athens 1980, pp. 187 ff.

basis of His energies that are manifested in the Economy.³ Precisely in this sense, God as the only cause of the beings and of the made ones, is considered by St. Maximus as “the only mind of the understanding and the understood, and word of the saying and the said; and life of the living and the lived, and as everything being and made for everyone, for those which are and are made”.⁴ In other words, all the so-called kataphatical names that are attributed to God, if they don’t signify the particular way of the three divine Persons’ existence, they do presuppose and express exactly this causal relationship of God with the world. As St. John Damascenus characteristically notes, summing up at this point the earlier tradition of the Fathers, God is called “both being...and essence” as “the cause of all beings and of all the essence”; “He is called both word and reasonable, both wisdom and wise” as “the cause of all words and wisdom, of both reasonable and wise”; in a similar way, He is also called both “mind and mental, life and alive, power and powerful”, called with many other likewise kataphatical names, as the cause of all beings and of the properties that describe them.⁵

But, while God, as the cause of all beings, is and becomes everything for all “that is and that is made”, He Himself, as the Church Fathers emphasize, is beyond “to be” and “to be made” of the created beings.⁶ The ontological difference between the created and the uncreated does not allow the substantial relationship between God and the world. The only possible relationship between them is the one according to the energies. That’s why all the kataphatic names rendered to God characterize, in their opinion, only and exclusively, either the particular way of the three Persons’ existence or the energetic relationship of God with the world and not His being itself. None of these names is capable of describing or expressing the divine essence, so that we can have some, even a rudimentary one, knowledge of it.⁷ The knowledge of the essence of God, as well as of the indissolubly connected with it exact way of the three divine Persons’ existence, is, for the Fathers, totally unfeasible on behalf of the created beings and, therefore, owed to their lack of

³ See Dionysius Areopagite, *De mystica Theologia, ad Timotheum*, 1, 2, PG 3, 1000 B; 3, PG 3, 1033 C. Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, Prooemium, PG 91, 664 B; *Quaestiones et dubia* 190, ed. J. H. Declerck, *Maximi confessoris quaestiones et dubia*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 10, Turnhout-Brepols 1982, p. 132.

⁴ See *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 A: “ο μόνος νους των νοούντων και νοουμένων, και λόγος των λεγόντων και λεγομένων και ζωή των ζώντων και ζωουμένων, και πάσι πάντα και ων και γινόμενος, δι’ αυτά τα όντα και γινόμενα”.

⁵ See *Expositio accurata fidei orthodoxae* 1, 12, PG 94, 848 A.

⁶ See Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 AB. John Damascenus, *op. cit.*, PG 94, 845 CD.

⁷ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 3, PG 45, 601 B: «Ει δε τις απαιτοίη της θείας ουσίας ερμηνείαν τινά και υπογραφήν και εξήγησιν, αμαθείς είναι της τοιαύτης σοφίας ουκ αρνησόμεθα: τοσούτον ομολογούντες μόνον, ότι ουκ έστι το αόριστον κατά την φύσιν επινοία τινί ρημάτων διαληφθήναι».

knowledge and understanding. “Hence, to know the divine essence”, underlines Basil the Great, “is to feel His incomprehensibility”.⁸ Moreover, John Damascenus, extending the incomprehensibility of the divine essence to the whole divine being, accentuates in the same oxymorous and emphatic way: “Then, the Divine is infinite and incomprehensible and only this can be comprehensible, the infinity and the incomprehensibility”.⁹ What we know of God, according to the Fathers, we came to know it through His revelation, which is realized by means of His energies, manifested in the Creation and in History. And that is so, because God does not communicate with the created world by means of His essence, but only through His energies. As very typically and emphatically Basil the Great stresses this truth, supported at this point unanimously by the later tradition of the Fathers, “We claim to know our God through His energies, and we don’t claim to approach His essence; because His energies come down on us, but His essence remains unreachable.”¹⁰ In a similar way, St. Maximus, too, referring to a relevant passage of St. Gregory the Theologian from his speech *In Theophania*¹¹, underlines with particular emphasis the unreachable and unintelligible of the divine essence on behalf of all the created beings, writing word for word the following: “From what God is according to the essence, that is, from the essence itself, He can never be known to exist. Because any sense of what He is, is impenetrable and completely unapproachable for all creation, equally for the visible and the invisible one, but from what exists around the essence, God reveals Himself only as existing and only to those who regard these things with due kindness and reverence”.¹² And, of course, all these that are considered to be

⁸ See *Epistola* 234, 2, PG 32, 869 C: “Είδησις ἄρα τῆς θείας οὐσίας ἡ αἰσθησις αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας”. See also G. D. Martzelos, “Der Verstand und seine Grenzen nach dem hl. Basilios dem Grossen”, in *Τόμος εὐρύτερος χιλιοστής εξακοσιοστής ἐπετείου Μεγάλου Βασιλείου (379- 1979)*, Thessalonica 1981, pp. 235 f.f.; idem, *Essence and energies of God according to Basil the Great. Contribution to the historico-dogmatic inquiry of the Orthodox Church’s teaching about the essence and energies of God* (in Greek), Thessalonica ²1993, pp. 39 ff.; 66 ff; idem, *Orthodox dogma and theological reflection. Studies of dogmatic theology A’*, (in Greek), Thessalonica 1993, pp. 83 ff.

⁹ See *op. cit.*, 1, 4, PG 94, 800 B: “Ἀπειρον οὖν τὸ θεῖον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον αὐτοῦ καταληπτόν, ἡ ἀπειρία καὶ ἀκαταληψία”.

¹⁰ See *Epistola* 234, 1 PG 32, 869 AB: “Ἡμεῖς δὲ ἐκ μὲν τῶν ἐνεργειῶν γνωρίζειν λέγομεν τὸν Θεὸν ἡμῶν, τῇ δὲ οὐσίᾳ αὐτῇ προσεγγίζειν οὐχ ὑπὸσχνοῦμεθα. Αἱ μὲν γὰρ ἐνέργειαι αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς καταβαίνουν, ἡ δὲ οὐσία αὐτοῦ μένει ἀπρόσιτος”. More on this matter see G. D. Martzelos, *Essence and energies of God according to Basil the Great. Contribution to the historico-dogmatic inquiry of the Orthodox Church’s teaching about the essence and energies of God*, Thessalonica ²1993, pp. 89 ff.

¹¹ It is about the quotation “ὦ μόνῳ σκιαγραφούμενος (ἐνν. ὁ Θεός), καὶ τοῦτο λίαν ἀμυδρῶς καὶ μετρίως, οὐκ ἐκ τῶν κατ’ αὐτόν, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν περὶ αὐτόν, ἄλλης ἐξ ἄλλου φαντασίας συλλεγομένης, εἰς ἐν τῇ αληθείᾳ ἰδὲ αὐτῇ» (*Homilia* 38, *In Theophania, sive Nathalitia Salvatoris*, 7, PG 36, 317 BC).

¹² See *De variis difficilibus locis ss. pp. Dionysii et Gregorii, ad Thomam v.s.*, PG 91, 1288 AB: «Ἐκ τῶν κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν, τουτέστι ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς, ὁ Θεός οὐδέποτε τι ὑπάρχων γινώσκεται. Ἀμήχανος γὰρ καὶ παντελῶς ἄβατος πάση τῇ κτίσει, ορατὴ τε καὶ αοράτω κατὰ τὸ ἴσον, ἡ περὶ τοῦ τι καθέστηκεν ἔννοια, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τῶν περὶ τὴν οὐσίαν μόνον ὅτι ἐστὶ, καὶ τὰτα καλῶς τε καὶ εὐσεβῶς θεωρουμένων, τοῖς ὁρώσιν ὁ Θεός αὐτόν ὑπενδίδωσι».

“around the essence” of God, do not indicate what God is, but either that He is, meaning that He exists, or what He is not.¹³ In this sense, God does not receive only the kataphatic names, which, as we have mentioned, express the particular way of the existence of His hypostaseis, as well as the diversity of His creative and provident relationships with the world, but He is also recipient of the apophatic names, with which He is completely differentiated from the created reality and which, as we understand, constitute, in fact, the essence of the apophatic theology. Therefore, the names that are attributed to God are distinguished in two basic categories: those that denote properties that are fit for God and those that denote properties that are not fit for His divine and uncreated nature¹⁴. So, in order to form a vague, yet a satisfactory and real image of God both these categories of names are essential. As very characteristically Basil the Great remarks, “Hence, about the names that God is called with, the ones denote the qualities that are appropriate for God, while the others the opposite, the ones that are inappropriate for Him. From these two is God’s character imprinted on us, from the denial of the inappropriate and the confession of the appropriate qualities”.¹⁵

In spite of the fact that both these categories of divine names are necessary in order to formulate a real and satisfactory sense of God, more suitable for God are, for the Fathers, the apophatic names, since only these are able to underline God’s superiority to the created beings. As St. Maximus typically refers in a laconic, yet rich in theological meanings point of his work *Mystagogia*, following in this occasion Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁶, to God we must attribute not the being but “rather the non-being, because that is more appropriate to be said of Him, as He is above the being”¹⁷. Exactly the same thing underlines also John Damascenus, epitomizing at this point both Dionysius and Maximus: “...it is impossible to say what God is in His essence; it is rather more suitable to speak of Him by deducting everything; as He is not one of the beings, not

¹³ See *op. cit.*, PG 91, 1288 BC: «Πάντα δε τα περί την ουσίαν ου το τι εστιν, αλλά τι ουκ έστιν υποδηλοί, οίον το αγέννητον, το άναρχον, το άπειρον, το ασώματον, και όσα τοιαύτα περί την ουσίαν εισί, και το τι μη είναι, ουχ ότι δε το τι είναι αυτήν παριστώσιν” αλλά και οι της προνοίας και της κρίσεως λόγοι, καθ’ους το παν σοφώς διεξάγεται, μεθ’ών και η εναρμόνιος της φύσεως θεωρία περί Θεού είναι λέγεται, τον δημιουργόν εαυτής ότι έστι μόνον αναλόγως δεικνύουσα».

¹⁴ See Dionysios Areopagite, *De coelesti hierarchia* 2, 2-3, PG 3, 140 BCD. John Damascenus, *op. cit.*, 1, 12, PG 94, 845 C – 848 A.

¹⁵ See *Adversus Eunomium* 1, 10, PG 29, 533 C: «Εν τοίνυν τοις περί Θεού λεγομένοις ονόμασι, τα μεν των προσόντων τω Θεώ δηλωτικά εστι, τα δε το εναντίον, των μη προσόντων. Εκ δύο γαρ τούτων οιοινεί χαρακτήρ τις ημίν εγγίνεται του Θεού, εκ τε της των απεμφαινόντων αρνήσεως και εκ της των υπάρχόντων ομολογίας». See also G. D. Martzelos, *op. cit.*, pp. 167 ff.

¹⁶ See *op. cit.*, 2, 3, PG 3, 140 D – 141 A.

¹⁷ See *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 B: “το μη είναι μάλλον, δια το υπερείναι, ως οικειότερον επ’ αυτού λεγόμενον”. Cf. Dionysius Areopagite, *op. cit.*, 2, 3, PG 3, 140 D – 141 A.

because He doesn't exist, but because He is above all beings and above the existence itself".¹⁸

Indeed; whichever kataphatic name or whichever kataphatic property we attribute to God it responds to assumed representations that have been formed in our thinking by relevant experiences of the created beings. But this involves the danger of idolizing God or creating a purely objectified and anthropomorphic image of Him, something that takes us further away from the real meaning of God. That is, besides, why Dionysius the Areopagite, on whom the later Fathers are dependent at many points, refuses to render God, within the frames of apophatic theology, properties and names, some of which are already attributed to Him in the Holy Scripture. It is needless, of course, to underline that such a consideration of God obviously presupposes a full detachment from the word for word inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Thus, God for him is neither mind nor word, neither essence nor power, neither light nor life, neither kingdom nor wisdom, neither one "nor unity, neither divinity or kindness nor is He a spirit, as we perceive it, neither filiality nor fatherhood, nor something else of us or of the beings that we know of; neither is He one of the non-existent nor one of the existent ones...He is neither darkness nor light, neither deception nor truth; neither is there an affirmation in Him at all nor a deduction".¹⁹ In other words, God is nothing of the above, in the way we have shaped them as meanings in our thoughts, based on the experience we have of the created beings. Even the same meaning of existence that we ascribe to God has been formed within us on the basis of the experience we have of the created beings. But God is uncreated and, therefore, does not exist in the same way that created beings do. And that's exactly why St. Maximus stresses that the "non-being" suits God, who is the true being, more than the "being", of course, not in the sense that His being is identified with His "non-being"-besides, such a thing would be an extreme absurdity- , but, in the sense that His being belongs, as he distinctively clarifies, to the "hyper-being", as His existence and nature transcend the existence and nature of the created beings.²⁰ Much more sharp and emphatic at this point is St. Symeon the New Theologian, who, following the steps of Dionysius the

¹⁸ See *op. cit.*, 1, 4, PG 94, 800 B: "Επί Θεού, τί ἐστίν, εἰπεῖν ἀδύνατον κατ' οὐσίαν· οικειότερον δὲ μᾶλλον ἐκ τῆς πάντων ἀφαιρέσεως ποιείσθαι τὸν λόγον· οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ὄντων ἐστὶν οὐχ ὡς μὴ ὄν, ἀλλ' ὡς ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ ὑπὲρ αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ εἶναι ὄν".

¹⁹ See *De mystica theologia, ad Timotheum*, 5, PG 3, 1045 D - 1048 A: "Αὐτίς δὲ ἀνιόντες λέγομεν, ὡς ...οὔτε νοῦς... οὐδέ λόγος ἐστίν... οὐδέ ἔχει δύναμιν οὔτε δύναμις ἐστίν οὔτε φῶς· οὔτε ζῆ οὔτε ζωὴ ἐστίν· οὔτε οὐσία ἐστίν οὔτε αἰὼν οὔτε χρόνος· οὐδέ ἐπαφή ἐστίν αὐτῆς νοητῆ οὔτε ἐπιστήμη, οὔτε ἀλήθεια ἐστίν οὔτε βασιλεία οὔτε σοφία, οὔτε ἐν οὔτε ἐνότῃς, οὔτε θεότης ἢ ἀγαθότης, οὐδέ πνεῦμα ἐστίν, ὡς ἡμᾶς εἰδέναι, οὔτε υἰότης, οὔτε πατρότης, οὐδέ τι ἄλλο τῶν ἡμῖν ἢ ἄλλω τινὶ τῶν ὄντων συνηγνωσμένων· οὐδέ τι τῶν οὐκ ὄντων, οὐδέ τι τῶν ὄντων ἐστίν... οὔτε σκότος ἐστίν οὔτε φῶς, οὔτε πλάνη οὔτε ἀλήθεια· οὔτε ἐστίν αὐτῆς καθόλου θέσις οὔτε ἀφαίρεσις".

²⁰ See *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 B. Cf. the similar aspect of holy Augustine: "Deus ineffabilis est; facilius dicimus quid non sit, quam quid sit" (*In Psalmum LXXXV*, 12, PL 37, 1090).

Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, underlines that God is unapproachable, ineffable, invisible, unspeakable and unintelligible, as He is considered as “being naught” and “non-being” in relation to the created beings. God, as he characteristically emphasizes, “lies beyond any called name, word and verb, and for this reason is He above and beyond the perception of any intellect, as He is naught.”²¹ Because the being naught can never be conceived by the human intellect and be given a name”.²²

This theological denial of God through apophatic theology is for the Church Fathers, in fact, a kataphasis of God. On this account, we have a real image of God only when we refuse to attribute to Him qualities of the created beings, since when we do attribute such qualities to Him, we virtually deny Him, by classifying Him in the order of the created. As St. Maximus once again characteristically remarks, “If, of course, it is imperative for us to recognize indeed the difference between God and the created beings, the affirmation of the hyper-being must be regarded as the deduction of (the created) beings, and the affirmation of the beings as the deduction of the hyper-being”.²³ Or, as he marks in another context, “in God the par excellence deprivations are more true, as they wholly witness the affirmation of the divinity through the complete deduction of the beings”.²⁴ This is, besides, the reason why Christ during His Transfiguration revealed Himself not “as conceived kataphatically through the affirmation of the beings, but as presenting, by means of the apophatic theology, the unapproachable of the divinity to be hidden”.²⁵ Moreover, Christ’s Transfiguration itself denotes, in his opinion, allegorically, yet very eloquently, the transition from kataphatic to apophatic theology. When the incarnated Word, he writes, “climbs together” with His disciples the mountain of theology, meaning Thavor, and is transfigured before them, then, He is no longer regarded in a

²¹ See *Theological Speech 3*, Sources Chretiennes 122 (=J. Darrouzes, *Suméon le Nouveau Théologien. Traités théologiques et éthiques, Introduction, Texte critique, Traduction et Notes*, tome I, Paris 1966), p. 162 (108-111): “Υπεράνω παντός ονόματος ονομαζομένου και λόγου και ρήματος ὧν, υπέρκειται και πάσης διανοίας κατάληψιν υπερεκπίπτει, μηδέν ὧν”.

²² See *Theological Speech 2*, Sources Chretiennes 122, p. 148 (256-257): “Οὐ γὰρ δύναται ποτε το μηδέν ὄν ὑπὸ ἀνθρωπίνης ἐννοίας ἐννοηθῆναι και ἐνσημανθῆναι ὀνόματι”. With the above-mentioned aspect of Symeon cf. Dionysius Areopagite, *De mystica theologia, ad Timotheum*, 3-5, PG 3, 1032 C – 1048 B; Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 BC.

²³ See *op. cit.*, PG 91, 664 B: “Δει γὰρ, εἴπερ ὡς ἀληθῶς το γνῶναι διαφοράν Θεοῦ και κτισμάτων ἐστὶν ἀναγκαῖον ἡμῖν, θέσιν εἶναι του υπερόντος την των ὄντων ἀφαίρεσιν· και την των ὄντων θέσιν, εἶναι του υπερόντος ἀφαίρεσιν”.

²⁴ See *Ad sanctissimum presbyterum ac praepositum Thalassium, De variis Scripturae Sacrae quaestionibus ac dubiis*, 25, PG 90, 333 D; C. Laga – C. Steel, *Maximi confessoris quaestiones ad Thalassium*, I (quaestiones I-LV), Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca 7, Turnhout – Brepols 1980, p. 165: “Ἐπὶ Θεοῦ μᾶλλον αι καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν στερήσεις ἀληθεύουσι, ποσῶς μηνύουσai την θεϊάν θέσιν δια της των ὄντων παντελούς ἀφαιρέσεως”.

²⁵ See *Quaestiones et dubia* 190, *op. cit.*, p. 132: “...καταφασκόμενον εκ της των ὄντων θέσεως, ἀλλὰ τη κατά ἀπόφασιν θεολογία παραδεικνύς το ἀπρόσιτον της θεότητος κρύφιον”.

kataphatic manner, being called God, holy, king or any other kataphatic name, but in an apophatic manner, being now called hyper-god, hyper-holy and the rest “in supremacy called” names. And that is so because only then is “the characteristic secrecy of His essence” revealed in all its greatness, which the human mind is completely unable to gaze, in the same way that the human eye is unable to gaze at the brightness of the sun, in spite of its presumable great visual ability.²⁶ Consequently, St. Maximus concludes, developing at this point a similar thesis of Gregory of Nyssa, he is deceived, the one who, while he longs to know God, believes that “the simple and beyond all intelligence one” resembles the created beings we know of and, as a result, forms in his thinking a mistaken and idolized image of God.²⁷ The only way for this man to be rescued from the danger of deception is the apophatic regard of God.²⁸

However, as both Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor emphatically stress, neither the kataphatic nor the apophatic regard of God can lead us to the true sense of God, because God, as uncreated and transcendental in His nature, is found beyond any kataphasis or apophasis.²⁹ St. Maximus characteristically notes that (God) “is simple and unknown and unreachable to all in His existence and utterly uninterpreted and beyond any kataphasis or apophasis”.³⁰ With this standpoint of theirs, the above mentioned Fathers, in their attempt to secure the true sense of God from the danger of idolization and anthropomorphism, expand so much the limits of apophatic theology so that it negates and refutes even its own gnoseological meaning. But this is the orthodox character of apophatic theology.³¹ Besides, a main target of

²⁶ See *Questiones et dubia* 191, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

²⁷ See *Ad sanctissimum presbyterum ac praepositum Thalassium, De variis Scripturae Sacrae quaestionibus ac dubiis*, 25, PG 90, 333 C; C. Laga – C. Steel, *op. cit.*, p. 165. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis, sive De perfectione vitae ex praescripto virtutis institutae*, PG 44, 377 B: “Απαγορεύει γαρ εν πρώτοις ο θεός λόγος, προς μηδέν των γνωσκομένων ομοιούσθαι παρά των ανθρώπων το Θεόν· ως παντός νοήματος του κατά τινα περιληπτικήν φαντασίαν εν περινοία τινί και στοχασμώ της φύσεως γινομένου, είδωλον Θεού πλάσσοντος και ου Θεόν καταγγέλλοντος”.

²⁸ See *op. cit.*, PG 90, 333 D; C. Laga – C. Steel, *op. cit.*

²⁹ See Dionysius Areopagite, Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia, ad Timotheum*, 5, PG 3, 1048 AB: “Ουδέ εστιν αυτής (meaning the cause of all beings) καθόλου θέσις, ούτε αφαιρέσις· αλλά των μετ’ αυτήν τας θέσεις και αφαιρέσεις ποιούντες αυτήν, ούτε τίθεμεν, ούτε αφαιρούμεν· επει και υπέρ πάσαν θέσιν εστιν η παντελής και ενιαία των πάντων αιτία, και υπέρ πάσαν αφαιρέσιν η υπεροχή του πάντων απλώς απολελυμένου και επέκεινα των όλων”; Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, 1000, PG 91, 664 BC: “Δει γαρ, είτερ ως αληθώς το γνώναι διαφοράν Θεού και κτισμάτων εστιν αναγκαίον ημίν, θέσιν είναι του υπερόντος την των όντων αφαιρέσιν· και την των όντων θέσιν, είναι του υπερόντος αφαιρέσιν· και άμφω περί τον αυτόν κυρίως θεωρείσθαι τας προσηγορίας, και μηδεμίαν κυρίως δύνασθαι το είναι φημί και το μη είναι. Άμφω μεν κυρίως, ως της μεν του είναι του Θεού κατ’ αιτίαν των όντων θετικής· της δε καθ’ υπεροχήν αιτίας του είναι πάσης των όντων αφαιρετικής· και μηδέ μίαν κυρίως πάλιν, ως ουδεμιάς την κατ’ ουσίαν αυτήν και φύσιν του τι είναι του ζητουμένου θέσιν παριστώσης. Ω γαρ μηδέν το σύνολον φυσικός κατ’ αιτίαν συνέζευκται, ή ον ή μη ον· τούτω ουδέν των όντων και λεγομένων, ουδέ των μη όντων και μη λεγομένων, εικότως εγγύς”.

³⁰ See *op. cit.*, PG 91, 664 C.

³¹ As very typically M. Begzos observes “Apophatisch von Gott reden heisst, dass man alle Attribute Gottes, sowohl die positiven wie auch die negativen, übersteigt” (“Der Apophatismus in der

the theological apophatism of the Greek Fathers is to turn against any potential objectification of God, which may happen not only with the kataphatic but also with the apophatic theology itself.

On these grounds, both Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor underline with emphasis that, if man truly wishes to know God, besides the spiritual prerequisites of purification and enlightenment, he must come forward stripped of any meaning or knowledge and only then will he be able to see “without eyes” and know “without knowing” the one who exists beyond any sight or knowledge.³² And that is so because the true vision and knowledge of God is found, according to them, in His being not seen and not known. As very characteristically Dionysius the Areopagite underlines, developing at this point a similar thesis of Gregory of Nyssa, only when we enter the over-enlightened divine darkness can we “through our lack of sight and knowledge see and know the one who is beyond sight and knowledge, by means of not seeing and not knowing - because that is to truly see and know”.³³ As Maximus the Confessor notes in the same oxymorous and contradictory way, “the complete silence declares God and the outmost absence of knowledge makes Him known”.³⁴ As man goes up the rising road of knowing God, his speech is cut down, it becomes shorter because he understands that not much needs to be said to describe the mystery of knowing God. And when he does enter the “beyond the mind...darkness”, then he realizes that to describe this transcendental experience not even “brevity” is needed, but only the “complete wordlessness and senselessness” (παντελής αλογία και ανοησία).³⁵ The “multi-named” (πολύωνυμος) and “much talked of” (πολύλογος) God is then rendered for man “anonymous” and “wordless”, according to the pointed characterizations of Dionysius the Areopagite.³⁶ But, in order for man to be able to penetrate, as another Moses, in the darkness of not

ostkirchlichen Theologie. Die kritische Funktion einer traditionellen Theorie heute”, in *Θεολογία* 26 (1986), p. 180). See also M. P. Begzos, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

³² See Dionysios Areopagite, *op. cit.*, 2, PG 3, 1025 AB. Maximus Confessor, *Ad sanctissimum presbyterum ac praepositum Thalassium, De variis Scripturae Sacrae quaestionibus ac dubiis*, 25, PG 90, 333 CD; C. Laga – C. Steel, *op. cit.*

³³ See *op. cit.*, PG 3, 1025 A: “Δι’ ἀβλεψίας και ἀγνωσίας ιδεῖν και γνῶναι τον υπέρ θεάν και γνῶσιν αὐτῷ τῷ μη ιδεῖν μηδέ γνῶναι – τούτο γαρ εστι το ὄντως ιδεῖν και γνῶναι”. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, PG 44, 376 D – 377 A: “Προΐών δε ο νους, και δια μείζονος αεί και τελειοτέρας προσοχής εν περινοία γινόμενος της ὄντως κατανοήσεως, ὅσω προσεγγίζει μάλλον τη θεωρία, τοσοῦτω πλέον ορά το της θείας φύσεως αθεώρητον. Καταλιπών γαρ παν το φαινόμενον, ου μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει η αἴσθησις, αλλά και ὅσα η διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν· αεί προς το ενδότερον ἵεται, ἕως αν διαδυή τη πολυπραγμοσύνη της διανοίας προς το αθέατόν τε και ακατάληπτον, κακεῖ τον Θεόν ἴδῃ. Εν τούτῳ γαρ η ἀληθής εστιν εἰδησις του ζητουμένου, οἷον τινί γνόφῳ τη ακαταληψία πανταχόθεν διειλημμένον”.

³⁴ See *op. cit.*, 65, PG 90, 756 C: “Ἡ τελεία μόνη κέκραγε σιγή και η παντελής καθ’ υπεροχήν ἀγνωσία παρίστησιν”.

³⁵ See Dionysios Areopagite, *op. cit.*, 3, PG 3, 1033 BC.

³⁶ See *De divinis nominibus* 7, 1, PG 3, 865 BC; *De mystica theologia, ad Timotheum*, 1, 3, PG 3, 1000 C.

knowing, where God lies hidden behind “wordlessness” and “senselessness”, he must, as Maximus stresses, give up his desire to know God through the natural theory, that is, the theory of the created beings, and through theology. Only then can he, “through apophasis and not-knowing”, receive true experience and knowledge of God.³⁷ In other words, the true experience and knowledge of God presupposes the apophatic attitude of man towards God, and that’s exactly why the most appropriate way to describe this experience is the use of apophatic terminology.

To understand this better, all we have to do is reflect on the apophatic way, in which Apostle Paul is forced to describe the experience he had, when “he was seized into paradise”: “he heard”, he says, “ineffable words that no man can utter”.³⁸ By saying “he heard”, he asserts the reality of the supernatural experience of God, while by characterizing these hearings as “ineffable words that no man can utter”, he underlines how poor and impotent the human language is to describe such an experience. That’s why he resorts to the use of apophatic terminology. To put it in another way, apophatism works, in this case, as the only outlet so as to describe as well and as objectively as possible the experience of the uncreated.

b. The unity and the empirical character of kataphatic and apophatic theology

Despite the fact that there seems to be a dialectical antithesis between kataphatic and apophatic theology, however, for the orthodox tradition of the Fathers no antithesis can be conceived between them. On the contrary; between the two exists an indissoluble and functional unity and relationship.³⁹ And this is understandable because, as we stressed in the beginning, for the Fathers of the Church, kataphatic as much as apophatic theology are not the fruits of an intellectualist meditation, but they are wholly founded on the divine revelation and on experience. The Fathers taste the experience of divine energies in the Creation and in

³⁷ See *Quaestiones et dubia* 73, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

³⁸ See 2 Kor. 12, 4.

³⁹ See Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia, ad Timotheum*, 1, 2, PG 3, 1000 B. Maximus Confessor, *De variis difficilibus locis ss. pp. Dionysii et Gregorii, ad Thomam* v.s., PG 91, 1288 C: “Εναντίως ουν ταις καταφάσεσι κειμένων των αποφάσεων, εναλλάξ αλλήλαις περί Θεόν φιλικώς συμπλέκονται και αλλήλων αντιπαραλαμβάνονται οίον αι μὲν αποφάσεις το μη τι είναι, αλλά τι μη είναι σημαίνουσαι το Θεῖον, περί το τι είναι το τούτο μη ον, ενούνται ταις καταφάσεσιν, αι δε καταφάσεις το μόνον ότι ἔστι, τίποτε δε τούτο ἐστι μη δηλούσαι, περί το μη είναι το τούτο ον ενούνται ταις αποφάσεσι, προς μεν αλλήλας δεικνύουσαι την ἐξ αντιθέσεως ἐναντιότητα, περί δε τον Θεόν τω εις ἄλληλα των ἄκρων κατά περίπτωσιν τρόπῳ την οικειότητα”.

History and produce positive names for God, making kataphatic theology. They compare the experience of God to respective experiences they have from the created reality and reach the conclusion that no name is capable of expressing the experience of the uncreated. So they are led to the production of negative names for God, making apophatic theology. Thus, they express the same experience of the divine revelation either kataphatically or apophatically, aiming to respectively stress either the reality of the experience of God or His transcendence in relation to the created world. That's why they use both when they refer to God, without juxtaposing the one with the other. Besides, the emphasis that both Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor place on the fact that God is beyond any kataphasis or apophasis,⁴⁰ leaves no room for the creation of a dialectic between kataphatic and apophatic theology. As very typically emphasizes on this point Dionysius the Areopagite, "We must render to It (i.e. the cause above all, that is, God) and affirm all positive attributes of the beings, as He is the cause of all, and mainly negate all these attributes, as It is the hyper-being above all, and we must not think that the apophaseis are juxtaposed with the kataphaseis, but rather that It, meaning the one that is beyond every deduction and affirmation, is further above all deprivations".⁴¹

Still, except the fact that no dialectical antithesis can be conceived between kataphatic and apophatic theology, there is, as we have mentioned, between them an indissoluble and functional unity. Not once in the orthodox tradition is the one used autonomously and independently from the other. St. John Damascenus even considers that the best possible way to attribute different names to God is not the autonomous kataphatic or apophatic regard of Him, but rather the functional linkage and simultaneous use of kataphatic and apophatic theology, which, for this reason, he characterizes as "most sweet...linkage of the two" (γλυκυτάτη ...ἐξ αμφοίν συνάφεια).⁴² And this is totally justifiable, as they both presuppose the same revelation and experience of God, which they also describe, aiming to formulate a real image of God, freed from the qualities of the created beings. Besides, their becoming autonomous involves serious dangers for the same essence and content of theology. The autonomous and excessive use of kataphatic theology might disregard the transcendence of the uncreated divine nature and lead to the objectification or idolization of God and to anthropomorphism. On the

⁴⁰ See Dionysius Areopagite, *op. cit.*, 5, PG 3, 1048 AB. Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, Prooem., PG 91, 664 BC.

⁴¹ See *op. cit.*, 1, 2, PG 3, 1000 B: "Δέον ἐπ' αὐτὴν καὶ πάσας τὰς τῶν ὄντων τιθέναι καὶ καταφάσκειν θέσεις, ὡς πάντων αἰτία, καὶ πάσας αὐτὰς κυριώτερον ἀποφάσκειν, ὡς ὑπὲρ πάντα ὑπερούση, καὶ μὴ οἶεσθαι τὰς ἀποφάσεις ἀντικειμέναις εἶναι ταῖς καταφάσεσιν, ἀλλὰ πολὺ πρότερον αὐτὴν ὑπὲρ τὰς στερήσεις εἶναι τὴν ὑπὲρ πάσαν καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν καὶ θέσιν".

⁴² See *op. cit.*, 1, 12, PG 94, 848 B.

other hand, the autonomous and excessive use of apophatic theology might disregard the Divine Economy and lead to theological agnosticism. That's exactly why the one cannot be conceived as independent from the other, but they are found, as we have said, in an indissoluble and functional unity and relationship with each other. In the same way that kataphatic theology rescues the apophatic one from the danger of theological agnosticism, so does apophatic theology rescue the kataphatic one from the danger of objectifying God or of idolization and anthropomorphism. The one works somehow like a brake for any potential deviations or misuses of the other, with the aim of keeping intact and unforged the true sense of God.

Therefore, owing to their in-between functional unity and their empirical character, they preserved orthodox theology from the danger of God's biblical sense being distorted, keeping at the same time His immanent presence as well as His transcendence in relation to the world unharmed. They excluded from orthodox theology the danger of becoming a field of intellectualist quests or falling from the level of theology to the level of anthropology, something that, unfortunately, happened in the West with the catalytic contribution of Scholastic Theology.

As it is known, scholastic theologians, too, have accentuated the existence of three roads that somehow resembled the kataphatic and apophatic theology of the Church Fathers. It is about the positive road (via affirmationis or causalitatis), with which they rendered to God positive qualities, the negative road (via negationis), with which they rendered to God negative qualities and the road of eminence (via eminentiae), with which they rendered to God positive qualities but in a superlative degree.⁴³ But these three roads were in fact an intellectual reference from the created to the uncreated and were not at all related to the experience of the uncreated, which, furthermore, the scholastics underestimated against the superior value they attributed to the intellect in order to gain knowledge of God.⁴⁴ So, without the essential for theology empirical base, they were led to the shaping of an anthropomorphic image of God, converting, in effect, theology to anthropology. What dramatic consequences this had for the essence of western theology and the course of the western spirituality became evident after the end of Scholasticism and especially during the 19th century with the appearance of the philosophical stream of atheism.

⁴³ See Chr. Androutsos, *Dogmatics of the Orthodox Eastern Church* (in Greek), Athens 1907, p. 47 f. J. Hirschberger, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, I. Teil, Basel-Freiburg-Wien ⁹1974, p. 504. N. A. Matsouka, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology A' (Introduction to the theological gnoseology)*, (in Greek), Thessalonica 1985, p. 207.

⁴⁴ See also N. A. Matsouka, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

It is not at all fortuitous the fact that atheism as a philosophical stream was born and raised in the West. Atheist philosophers rejected the existence of God because they had formed the opinion, cultivated for so many centuries by Scholastic Theology, that God is a being approachable to the human intellect and is more or less characterized by human properties, only that He has them in the superlative degree.⁴⁵ As Feuerbach characteristically maintained, virtually resounding the sense of God according to Scholastic Theology, “All predicates, all definitions of the divine being are basically human”,⁴⁶ and, in this sense, “God’s personality itself is nothing more than the distorted and objectified personality of man”.⁴⁷ In other words, God did not create man in His image and resemblance, but rather man created God in his own image and resemblance.⁴⁸ Indeed; in spite of this atheistic and generalized formulation, this is what, unfortunately, happened in the West with Scholastic Theology: that is, there was created a perception of God in the image and resemblance of man.

But although atheism as a philosophical stream was born and raised in the West, as we have said, the fact that it was nothing but acquired and introduced in the East is hardly fortuitous, as well. We can fully understand this, if we take into consideration the fact that apophatic theology, cultivated by the great Fathers of the Eastern Church, did not allow the creation of favorable circumstances for the birth and development of atheism. Atheism, as it is obvious, presupposes by necessity the existence of at least one positive and objectified image of God, so that the denier of God knows beforehand what he actually denies.⁴⁹ If he doesn’t know it, he also can’t deny it. In this sense, the

⁴⁵ See M. L. Farantos, *Dogmatics II, 1 (The question about God)*, (in Greek), Athens 1977, pp. 518 ff.

⁴⁶ See L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, ed. Ph. Reclam Jun., Stuttgart 1989, p. 355: “Alle Prädikate, alle Bestimmungen des göttlichen Wesens sind grundmenschliche”. See also *op. cit.*, p. 55: “...alle Bestimmungen des göttlichen Wesens sind darum Bestimmungen des menschlichen Wesens”; p. 67: “Das Geheimnis der unerschöpflichen Fülle der göttlichen Bestimmungen ist daher nichts anderes als das Geheimnis des menschlichen als eines unendlich verschiedenartigen, unendlich bestimmbaren, aber eben deswegen sinnlichen Wesens”.

⁴⁷ See *op. cit.*, p. 340: “Die Persönlichkeit Gottes ist also das Mittel, wodurch der Mensch die Bestimmungen und Vorstellungen seines eignen Wesens zu Bestimmungen und Vorstellungen eines andern Wesens, eines Wesens außer ihm macht. Die Persönlichkeit Gottes ist selbst nichts anderes als die entäußerte, vergegenständlichte Persönlichkeit des Menschen”. See also *op. cit.*, p. 54: “Das göttliche Wesen ist nichts anderes als das menschliche Wesen oder besser: das Wesen des Menschen, abgesondert von den Schranken des individuellen, d.h. wirklichen, leiblichen Menschen, vergegenständlicht, d.h. angeschaut und verehrt als ein anderes, von ihm unterschiedenes, eignes Wesen”; p. 69: “... so ist auch erwiesen, dass, wenn die göttlichen Prädikate Bestimmungen des menschlichen Wesens sind, auch das Subjekt derselben menschlichen Wesens ist”; p. 75: “was der Mensch von Gott aussagt, das sagt er in Wahrheit von sich selbst aus”.

⁴⁸ See A. Esser, *Ludwig Feuerbach, Das Wesen der Religion*, ed. L. Schneider, Heidelberg 1983, p. 26. S. Holm, *Religionsphilosophie*, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart 1960, p. 117. M. L. Farantos, *op. cit.*, p. 520. See also B. M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century (illustrated from Writers of the Period)*, Cambridge (University Press) 1996, p. 82 ff.

⁴⁹ Analysis of the phenomenon of atheism from a theological, philosophical, psychological and sociological point of view see E. Coreth – J. B. Lotz, *Atheismus kritisch betrachtet. Beiträge zum*

theological denial of the sense of God within the frames of apophatic theology in the East did not allow the creation of a positive and objectified image of God so that someone could be led to its denial. And that is why theoretical atheism did not thrive in the traditional orthodox countries of the East, but it constituted a foreign body within their spiritual inheritance and tradition.

Conclusion

Summing up all the above, we come easily to the conclusion that the Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church, projecting the kataphatic and apophatic aspect of God and stressing the empirical base of kataphatic as much as of apophatic theology, they have outlined the frame of the true knowledge of God and decisively contributed to the formulation of a sense of Him freed from objectifications and anthropomorphisms. And this, as we have seen, had direct and substantial repercussions for the course of theology and for the spiritual inheritance and tradition of the orthodox East, in general.

In our times, when the rapid development of technology has formed a new reality, which, moreover, is called by some “society of knowledge”, the contemporary man, either in his close or in his broader social environment, is literally bombarded with information and knowledge that tend to establish the impression that there are no limits in his effort to gain knowledge of the universal reality and that to achieve this is just a matter of time. So it is not easy for him to understand and acknowledge the gnoseological importance of apophatism. Knowledge has for him an exclusively kataphatic character and that’s why apophatism is perceived as denial of knowledge and agnosticism. And it is also characteristic the fact that this view gets unconditionally accepted not only by the simple average man, but even by the intellectuals of our times, despite the predominant position that the philosophical apophatism of K. Jaspers, M. Heidegger, K. Popper and L. Wittgenstein has in our times and especially the axiomatic philosophical principle of Wittgenstein, according to which “of what one cannot speak, he must keep silent” (“Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen”).

But if such an optimistic gnoseological aspect could potentially be correct and apply for the created reality, it can have no application for the uncreated nature of God. For it, on the contrary, the limits of knowledge are in full effect and remain unbreakable. And the case is so because the

Atheismusproblem der Gegenwart, Erich Wewel Verlag, München - Freiburg/Br. 1971. See also B. T.Gioultsis, *Sociology of Atheism, Thematic limits and problems* (in Greek), Thessalonica 1984.

ontological gap between the created and the uncreated, as the Fathers stressed in different ways and with particular emphasis, does not allow the gnoseological access to the uncreated on the behalf of the created. To put it another way, created beings are characterized with specific gnoseological boundaries that are intertwined with their nature and are unable to go beyond them without running the risk of deception. That's why the only way to keep the biblical sense of God intact, offending neither His relationship with the world nor His ontological transcendence, is by using kataphatic and apophatic theology in an indissoluble unity and relationship with each other.

Besides, the theological problems that are sometimes raised within the frames of inter-religious contacts as much as of the globalized social reality of our times, through the intermingling of the Christians with representatives and supporters of different religious views, regarding the nature and the racial hypostasis of God, have no place in the orthodox patristic theology, since they presuppose the projection of anthropomorphic representations and properties to the sphere of the divine, converting, thus, the sense of God to a purely antropomorphic reality. But, as we have seen, the use of apophatic theology in the orthodox patristic tradition does not allow the formulation of a sense of God with anthropomorphic properties and features that are fitting for the created reality. When the Church Fathers deny theologically even the sense of existence to God or of properties, through which God reveals Himself to the Creation and in History, we realize that they leave no space for the formulation of an objectified nature or a racial hypostasis that will suit God. The biblical sense of God is, for the Church Fathers, completely free from such kind of anthropomorphic perceptions and objectifications. Yet, this admirable theological conquest could not have been realized, if the Church Fathers hadn't used kataphatic and apophatic theology simultaneously, in an unbreakable unity and relationship with each other.

And that, we maintain, constitutes in this case the quintessence and the greater contribution of the Fathers of the Orthodox East to the formulation of the sense of God and its establishment in Orthodox Theology and, hence, to the confrontation of theological problems that emerge about the sense of God within the frames of the globalized social reality of our times.