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Habilitation thesis: *The Apophatic Horizon of Christian Apologetics and Its Dialogue with Philosophy*

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Abstract

The academic research that we have conducted throughout the years is centered on the dialogue between *Orthodox theology* (especially patristic and neo-patristic apophatic theology) on the one hand and *modern and contemporary philosophy* (German idealism, modern atheism, phenomenology, hermeneutics and postmodernism) on the other hand. In this dialogue, the apophatic horizon of the experience of the Orthodox Church plays an important role, as it is the very foundation of the apologetics that we are trying to propose.

The thesis comprises three sections. **(I)** The first section, which presents academic and professional achievements, is structured into five parts. The first part, called “Patristic theology, the root of Orthodox apologetics”, emphasizes the importance of the Church Fathers for contemporary apologetics and describes the relationship between theology and philosophy during the initial stages of apologetics and as part of the Nicene Creed. It also addresses the relationship between holiness and the hermeneutics of the Holy Tradition, using Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a starting point. In the apologetic dialogue with modern and contemporary philosophy, we have given particular consideration to some of the Church Fathers and to their ideas: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – the idea of mystical theology and its relationship with the divine names, as well as the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies; Saint Gregory of Nyssa – the vision of God, the infinite and epectasy; Saint Gregory of Nazianzus – the spiritual significance of theology and the dogma of the Holy Trinity; Saint Basil the Great – the Christian use of culture, the Holy Trinity and the characteristics of spiritual life; Saint Athanasius the Great – the idea of the Incarnation of the Word for the deification of man; Saint Gregory Palamas – the unity-in-distinction between the uncreated energies and the essence of God, the Prayer of the Heart and the criticism towards scholastic rationalism. The fathers of the Philokalia and the emphasis they put on mystical experience have also been tremendously important in this dialogue: Saint Anthony the Great, Saint Maximus the Confessor, the Neptic Fathers, Saint John of the Ladder, Saint Isaac of Syria and Saints Barsanuphius and John. By using these ideas, along with neo-patristic Orthodox theology as a basis, we have emphasized

the apophatic profile and especially the apophatic horizon of apologetics, in which the hermeneutics of the holy writings is doubled by holiness and prayer, whereas gnoseology is doubled by an ontology of deification.

In the second part, called “Modernity, between the critique of religion and the arguments for God’s existence”, we presented the outcomes of our research on the philosophy of religion for Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx, formulating theological critiques, as well as a few apologetic answers grounded in the importance of apophatic theology. These answers have remained “invisible” to the great German philosophers, either due to the absolute importance they gave to autonomous reason (Kant and Hegel) or due to a somewhat militant form of atheism (Feuerbach and Marx). Our main critique was that the religious thought of these philosophers only exceeds the onto-theological idol of God by way of exception and only seldom reaches the living God found in apophatic theology and in the experience of the Church.

The third part, “Postmodernism and apophatic theology”, starts with an elaboration on Cioran’s religious skepticism and perspective on religion. We provided a unified interpretation of this paradoxical, fragmentary, and contradictory thinker from the perspective of the concept of *excess*. We also formulated “the Cioran argument” in favor of the existence of God, based on the intensity and passion of his diatribes. Secondly, we established a connection between Gianni Vattimo’s weak thought in the context of the return to religion and Orthodox apophatic theology, proving that the nihilism of the former must not be mistaken for the apophatic nature of the latter, although both of them share the intention of overcoming rationalism in favor of a more plenary experience.

In the fourth part, called “Phenomenology and theology”, we presented the link between phenomenology and religion/theology in the works of Edmund Husserl, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Yves Lacoste. As far as the relationship between Husserl’s phenomenology and religion is concerned, we have shown that, in spite of the methodological atheism practiced by the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, Husserl still referred to God, turning to a phenomenology *without reduction* and to metaphysics. Secondly, we have demonstrated that Jean-Luc Marion practices a post-metaphysical form of apologetics, inspired by the dogmas of faith and with a double apologetic endeavor: on the one hand, he emphasizes theological phenomena when analyzing them in the field of phenomenology; on the other hand, he admits their specificity and restores them to theology, which thus gains more legitimacy. Thirdly, we argued against Jean-Yves Lacoste’s theological reduction, proposing instead a “theological counter-reduction” which is suitable for a phenomenology that is open towards theology; in other words, to a theo-phenomenology. In spite of its name, which may sound negative, we have shown that the purpose of this counter-reduction remains similar to that of the phenomenological reduction: it helps religious phenomena to appear better and more clearly. A possible theo-phenomenological principle would be contrary to Husserl’s principles: “As much faith, as much appearance”.

In the fifth and last part, called “Neo-patristic theology and contemporary Orthodox apologetics”, we presented a theo-phenomenological interpretation of love in the thought of father Dumitru Stăniloae, supporting the idea that theo-phenomenology can bridge the gap

between the phenomenology of the world (Husserl and Heidegger) and the phenomenology of life (Michel Henry). In this interpretation, the theo-phenomenology of love proposes a different way of appearing, one through the Holy Spirit, who, even though He might only be “discovered” scientifically in His consequences, offers the fullness of an apophatic experience that exceeds mundanity and finite life, calling for a transfiguration and giving absolute meaning to the infinite pursuits of man.

We ended with an analysis of David-Bentley Hart’s apologetics, who criticizes contemporary neo-atheism, relying both on patristic and neo-patristic apophatic theology and on the dialogue with contemporary philosophy, especially postmodern philosophy.

Our personal contribution, highlighted at the end of each chapter, consists of three main directions, which focused on edifying an Orthodox apologetics for which the horizon of apophatic theology and the dialogue with philosophy play a fundamental role. The guiding principles of this apologetics are given by: (1) the *critique* of anti-religious and atheist philosophical arguments, present in the forms of philosophy discussed, from the perspective of apophaticism; (2) highlighting and consolidating the arguments in favor of Christian faith and of the existence of God, which these forms of philosophy have already formulated; (3) formulating new arguments, inspired, on the one hand, by patristic and neo-patristic thought and, on the other hand, by the dialogue between Orthodox theology and contemporary philosophy, with a view of edifying an apologetics which is as convincing and as beneficial as possible for today’s world.

(II) The second section presents the evolution and development plan of our professional, scientific and academic career, as well as the areas of research that we shall henceforth pursue, in the context of our previous experience.

(III) Lastly, the third section presents the bibliography that we relied upon while constructing the previous two sections, as well as a report regarding the visibility of our personal contributions both nationally and internationally.