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The Concept of God in Christianity

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**INTRODUCTION**

During our previous meeting Mr. Zuhair has presented an excellent paper about the way God is perceived and understood in Islam. He has specifically emphasized the nature of God as absolute Truth, pointing out God's incomprehensible, incomparable and indefinable character. As it was mentioned during the talk, human language and human understanding are inherently inadequate in grasping the full nature of the Almighty God. Hence, any definition or any description of God is bound to be only partial, and even the most profound discourse on the nature of the Almighty falls short from fathoming the absolute truth.

I believe that most Christians, who have given thought to the matter, would readily agree to this characterization of God. One of the early Church fathers, Evagrius of Pontus has noticed once: "God cannot be grasped by the mind. If He could be grasped, He would not be God."<sup>1</sup> Hence, I do not suppose there is much disagreement between Islam and Christianity as far as this aspect of Divine Reality is concerned. Yet in this paper I would like to switch the emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kallistos Ware, "The Orthodox Way", St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1979, p. 11.

slightly, talking not of God as the Wholly Other, the Transcendent and Absolute Being, but of God as a *Revealed* God. More specifically, I would like to briefly look at the way we, the Christians, understand God through His revelations throughout history of the world. To begin with, the fact that God reveals Himself to humans in one way or another is what makes a *religion* possible. We cannot reach God ‘out there’ by our human efforts as long as He decides to remain hidden and withdrawn. Any knowledge of God, as well as any religious tradition that seeks to have genuine communication with God, begins with God reaching out to humans first and revealing Himself through visible nature, His Word, or His messengers – the prophets. And the degree and the depth of our knowledge of God will directly depend on the extent of that revelation. The main topic of my paper is the way Christians understand and interpret these various manifestations of the Almighty to humans.

One important caveat is in order. The ambitious topic announced in the title of the paper could surely get as many diverse treatments as there are various diverse Christian traditions and sects. This paper, however, does not aim to present all the existing viewpoints on God in Christianity, but will try to summarize some of the central tenets about God which would be acceptable (one hopes) to the majority of Christian denominations. It is well known, that one way to avoid the bitter doctrinal disagreements is to stay clear of the details of the issue, keeping the discourse at a certain level of generality. The limited purpose of the present paper can well tolerate this generality, as long as it does not mingle certain fundamental distinctions. Inevitably, though, one’s take on such an issue will always be colored by the author’s own professional and religious affiliations.

## **THEOPHANIES**

In Christian theology we usually employ the word ‘theophany’ to refer to direct appearances of God, or angels as the immediate messengers of God, to certain characters of the Bible, such as the appearance of the three angels to Abraham and his wife Sarah in the Old Testament. Allow me to use the term ‘theophany’ in a slightly wider sense, referring to all occasions when God’s character is revealed, whether through direct divine appearance, such as was the case with Moses on Mount Sinai, through the words of the prophets and messengers of God, or through the nature of His created order.

One of the fundamental tenets of Christianity in this respect is that God reveals Himself gradually throughout human history after the Fall, with the incarnation of God’s Son Jesus Christ being the final and the most complete stage of all previous theophanies. In the New Testament, in the Epistle to Hebrews it is written: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe” (Hebrews 1:1-3). In other words, Christian theology recognizes a certain progression in our understanding of God, from the cursory and limited idea of the one Almighty God that led Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to the Promised Land, to a much more comprehensive understanding of God’s character after Jesus Christ and the writings of the Apostles. Indeed, St. Paul writes that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). Hence, for Christians, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is the ultimate theophany, the ultimate revelation of God, and through knowledge of Christ we know God Himself.

But what can we say about God after we looked at the life and teaching of Christ? First of all, God reveals Himself in Christ as a loving, merciful God, who seeks to save the sinners from the eternal damnation. The attitudes of peace, unconditional love, forgiveness and nonresistance to evil that Jesus exhibits in His sermons and His deeds appear to be quite novel and unique for the world at that time. Anyone who reads the Old Testament and the New Testament cannot fail to notice that God of the Old Testament both in His character and in His demands appear to be very different from the God that Jesus preached. Indeed, the early Christianity struggled with the number of sects, such as Gnosticism and Marcianism (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries), which tried to sever the Old Testament from the new revelations of Jesus Christ and the Apostles, based on this alleged incongruity between the two traditions. Eventually, however, the Church has worked out an understanding of the progressive nature of revelation, which enabled one to look at the message of the Old Testament as containing the culturally bound and often one-sided concept of God – the concept, whose historical development would be brought to completion only with the ministry of Christ on Earth.

I would like to point here to some of the main shifts *in understanding* of God which occur with the advent of the New Testament era. These are the four main points of difference, as I understand them:

1. God of one nation (namely, that of Israel) is now perceived as the God of all people and all races.
2. God, whose main moral passion is universal justice and a just retribution for sin ('eye for an eye') is now seen as God who values mercy, compassion and forgiveness over the demands of the retributive justice.

3. A distant and fearsome God of the Old Testament, as the ultimate law-giver and the punisher of sinners, is now perceived as being closer to human needs and more sensitive to human inadequacies.
4. God who requires elaborate temple ritual and a physical sanctuary here on earth in order to reveal His presence, is now understood as the God who lives in every person's heart through His Holy Spirit.

These are only some of the fundamental changes in perception of God that occur after Christ. We do not suppose, however, that God has changed from the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus Christ. God does not endure any change, neither with respect to His essential, nor accidental characteristics. Rather, our understanding of God became relatively more accurate, relatively more complete as compared with the conceptions of God derived from the earlier prophets. Of course, this is not because the human beings became much smarter and were able to discover more facts about God. It is rather because God was willing to open up more to us, to reveal more of his true nature, most importantly, through the character and teachings of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we still recognize that in this life even with our best efforts we see God, in St. Paul's words, "as if through a glass dimly", and the ultimate and most complete theophany is reserved for the life to come, when we will see God "face to face."

A natural question to ask is why God waited so long to reveal His true character through the person of Jesus Christ, the character defined by unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness. In a sense, a similar question could be asked with regards to any messenger of God, starting with the prophets of the Old Testament, who reveal something new about the divine plans, desires and expectations. We may ask, for instance, why God waited for so long before He revealed to

Moses the moral law in the form of the Ten Commandments, the revelation, which has changed significantly the way God was perceived by the people of Israel. But, clearly, this kind of questioning is not very fruitful. We may speculate that the coming of Christ has coincided with certain social and political conditions of the world, which would be most favorable for the quick spread of the Gospel (e.g., the unification of much of the western world under Rome, Greek being the universal and convenient language of communication, etc.), or we may suggest, that on a historical scale the humanity has reached a certain level of maturity and was at that point able to accept the radically new message of Christ. But all these would remain human speculations and guesses. St. Paul writes that God sent forth His Son “when the *fullness* of time came” (Galatians 4:4). One must admit that we are not in a position to judge which criteria God might have used to determine that the time was ripe for the Messiah to appear on earth.

### **GOD AS TRINITY – THE CENTRAL MYSTERY**

Traditional Christianity, whether Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy or the majority of the established Protestant sects, all accept the belief that God is one, and yet He exists in Three Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to the fundamental Christian doctrine of the **Trinity**. Historically, the idea of God as being One in Three Persons is one of the late ones to appear among the other doctrines about God. It can be seen as the final revelation or the final theophany, which was clearly formulated only during the first three centuries centuries after Christ. It is true, though, that the belief in Trinity has solid

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<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed one of the most widely accepted beliefs across various Christian denominations. Yet it is not without its contestants. The anti-trinitarian movement within early Christianity is represented, for instance, by Arianism. There are several contemporary protestant sects, such as Jehova’s Witnesses, the Mormons, and the Unitarian Church, which explicitly deny the doctrine of the Trinity.

foundation in the teaching of Christ and the writings of the Apostles, but it still took several hundreds of years for the Church Fathers to enunciate the doctrine, and to codify it in the central creed of the Christian Church – the Nicene-Constantinople Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

There is no need to deny that the doctrine of a Triunite God is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian Church. This belief defies the rules of ordinary formal logic, and goes beyond our limited common sense. It implies that God reveals Himself in history as three distinct persons, and yet He is one and the same God who acts throughout. There is in God genuine diversity as well as true unity. This Trinitarian belief stands before us as a real challenge, a “cross for human ways of thought” (in the words of Vladimir Lossky). Indeed, if there were some universal scale where different religions would be evaluated with respect to the simplicity of their core beliefs, and thus, the relative ease of acceptance, the doctrine of the Trinity might well pull Christianity toward the bottom of the list. And yet, mere simplicity of the doctrines was not of the primary concern to the Apostles and the Church fathers, who developed the notion of the Triunite God. On the final analysis, this doctrine should be accepted on faith, yet with the hope of its eventual confirmation by the personal spiritual experience of a believer as he grows in his awareness of God. Still, several words should be said here about the way the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and was described by the Church Fathers.

The central claim here is that all three Persons of the Trinity, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share one and the same divine essence (*ousia*), but yet differ in certain relational and functional qualities. In the Gospel according to John, Christ clearly says: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). In the fundamental Christian Creed, formulated at the Council of Nicea (325 B.C.), it is reaffirmed that Jesus Christ is “true God from true God”, “one in

essence” with God the Father. The same is later affirmed about the Holy Spirit: He is likewise truly God, “one in essence” with the Father and the Son. But despite the fact that there is genuine distinction between three coequal and coeternal persons within the Trinity, there is never separation. Father, Son and Spirit have only one will and not three, only one energy, and not three. They are not three Gods but one true God, and each Person of the Trinity possesses entire Godhead in its totality. Yet, being three persons, they stand in relationship to each other, with God the Father being the principle of origin (but *not* of creation) for the other two Persons. The two other Persons are each defined in terms of their relationship to God the Father: the Son is “begotten” by the Father, and the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine that the nature of Godhead consists in the loving communion of three divine Persons cannot be established by a logical proof. The *threeness* of one God is something revealed to us in Scripture, Apostolic tradition and the experience of the Saints. And for Christians, the truth of this belief is best attested by their personal spiritual experience and their continuous life in God. Hence it would be appropriate to conclude this section by the description of the Trinity written by St. Gregory of Nyssa, a Greek father, who lived during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and who draws in this passage not on the power of discursive reason, but on the richness of his own experience in God:

The Son who exists always in the father can never be separated from him, nor can the Spirit ever be divided from the Son... He who receives the Father also receives at the same time the Son and the Spirit. It is impossible to envisage any kind of

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<sup>3</sup> There are some historically important disagreements between the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic churches about the proper way of understanding the nature of the Trinity, and especially about the relations of the three Persons within the Trinity. The Western Church defines the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father *and the Son* (...*filioque*), whereas the Eastern Orthodox retains the original formulation. There are several theologically significant implications of this minor discrepancy, but these need not be entered here.

severance or disjunction between them. There is between the three a sharing and a differentiation that are beyond words and understanding. The distinction between the persons does not impair oneness of nature, nor does the shared unity of essence lead to a confusion between the distinctive characteristics of the persons. Do not be surprised that we should speak of the Godhead as being at the same time both unified and differentiated. Using riddles, as it were, we envisage a strange and paradoxical diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity.<sup>4</sup>

## **GOD AND HUMANS**

So far I have emphasized the facts of divine revelation to humans, which allowed us to have an understanding of the nature of God, however partial and inadequate it might be. But our relation to God is not limited to the relation of the rational subjects to Divine Reality as the mere external object of our knowledge. Christianity implies that the connection here is much closer, since we, humans, being created in God's image and likeness, in some sense partake of God's being. If you wish, there is a divine spark, a divine potential in each person. As was mentioned earlier, the three Persons of the divine Trinity share the same essence, which is an essence that no human can share. What we humans can share, however, is God's activity or energies (*energeia*) in the broadest sense, which would include His character, values, dispositions. It is of special importance to the Orthodox tradition in Christianity to interpret the earthly life of a Christian in terms of gradual ascension towards God, or, more specifically, in terms of gradual regaining of the image of God, which was lost after the Fall. But even though we should acquire as much of God's energies as is humanly possible, and therefore continue to grow toward him, nevertheless God can never be exhausted by us; there will always be more to

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Kallistos Ware, "The Orthodox Way", St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1979, p. 31.

acquire. God is always *hyper*, a Greek term that means "beyond." Each point of spiritual growth is merely the beginning of more growth toward Him. Through our faith and good works we can aspire to become "like God", even though we remain totally human. This goal of human life in Orthodox theology is known as *theosis*, or 'deification' of man, referring to the ideal mystical union between man and God.

For Christians, the root of our present relationship to God lies in the belief in Divine incarnation. It is the belief that God in his limitless love have chosen to identify Himself with His creation by becoming man. The Incarnation of Christ marks a beginning of a new stage in the history of man, and reveals the full possibilities of the human nature. Christ is seen as the first perfect man, who has completely realized the 'likeness' of God, thus, among other things, setting an important ideal for the rest of humanity. The complete union with God, which stands as a target for every Christian journey, was thus first realized in the person of Christ.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

From the very beginning, we have observed a certain tension between the two approaches to the question of God in major monotheistic religions. On the one hand, God is seen as being beyond the human grasp, whose every quality and every attribute exceeds the capacities of human understanding. Such a God allows us to stand in awe and astonishment before Him, but silences any attempt to describe Him. On the other hand, God reveals Himself to humans, is present everywhere in a personal way, fills all things with His Divine presence, and, as a result, we are capable of knowing God and speaking of Him. This is the tension between the consciousness of the *otherness*, and yet the *nearness* of the Eternal. These two poles in human's experience of the Divine, however, are equally important in the life of a Christian. Christians

often describe themselves as spiritual travelers, where the journey last for a lifetime. And the further we advance, the more conscious we become of these two contrasting facts – the radical otherness and transcendence of God and yet His unique closeness to us. The progress on this spiritual journey is marked not by cancelling or overcoming one of these two aspects of the Divine nature, that is, *not* by moving from the understanding of God as radically distant to the experience of God as a close and personal Being, but rather by retaining and deepening both of these poles. Paradoxically, the spiritual maturity in the Christian tradition implies the increasing consciousness of God’s Otherness, recognizing God as incomparably greater than anything we can say or think about Him, as well as approaching the limits of close personal relationship with Him, which culminates in the goal of becoming the God-like creatures.