

The Knowledge of God in the Light of Contemporary Gnoseology in Saint Basil the Great

Alexandru Nicoară & Bogdan Ionescu*

A. The knowledge of God and the Trinitarian theology

Saint Basil the Great develops and perfects the Trinitarian theology of Saint Athanasius the Great. Out of all three Cappadocian Fathers, he carries the title of *the Great*, being a first rate intellectual, a spiritual man, a liturgist and an organiser of monastic life.

Educated in prestigious schools, he assimilates a remarkable culture, both secular and spiritual. Besides his abilities as an organiser, he also contributed in developing and defending the orthodox Trinitarian theology. His discourses *On the Holy Spirit* and *Refutation of the Apology of the Impious Eunomius* are relevant in this sense. Due to the conditions of his times, he made the decision to write against those who challenged the divine nature of the Holy Spirit. Referring to the Holy Spirit's doxological formulas, Saint Basil considers that the Church has used two formulas, and his work would become a source of inspiration for Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Saint Ambrose's works became the channels through which Saint Basil's ideas were introduced in the Christian West.

The importance of the knowledge of God has been developed by Murray Hogg¹. Referring to the discourse *On the Holy Spirit*, the author concludes that Saint Basil speaks about multiple types of knowledge:

a. Propositional knowledge

* Ὁ Alexandru Nicoară καὶ ὁ Bogdan Ionescu εἶναι διδάκτορες Θεολογίας τοῦ Craiova University.

1. *Paradosis*, t. 1 (2014).

b. Tacit knowledge – a type of knowledge through examples.

Michael Polany considers this type of transmission of knowledge to be unspoken. Just like playing an instrument does not presume mastering the theoretical aspect of it, so should the knowledge of God be extended from a propositional one to a tacit, practical one.

c. Relational knowledge – the knowledge of God cannot be only theoretical, but it also implies a type of interpersonal relationship. This knowledge cannot happen outside of the communion between people.

McAdams considers the “psychological traits of a person, their motivation, to not be enough to completely know a person”².

Authentic knowledge implies a certain communion, not just a psychological, purely behavioural, knowledge. To understand the epistemic role of the Holy Spirit, we must highlight His equality with the Son and the Father. The knowledge of God is given to us by the Holy Spirit, not just through Him. An important feature underlined by Saint Basil is that he does not give a logical or ontological priority to the Person over divine Nature. Saint Basil states that the equality of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity represent Three distinct Hypostases of the same Being. He points out the remarkable importance of the Holy Bible and Tradition in the process of the knowledge of God.

B. The knowledge of God and contemporary gnoseology

Robert Audi and Richard Feldman³, referring to the process of knowledge, identify more sources of knowledge:

- tactile perception, through which we understand the sensitive word;
- reason, through which we understand in an abstract way, as well as our capacity to establish correlations;
- introspection, through which we take notice of our inner life;
- memory, through which we revise what we have learned in the past;

2. Dan P. McAdams, “What do we know when we know a person?”, *Journal of Personality*, 63, 3 (1995), p. 387.

3. R. Audi, *Epistemology: Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge, London & New York ²2003.

- confession, through which we have access to the conditional knowledge from past years.

Murray tries to apply these sources of knowledge, the way contemporary epistemology identifies it, to the work of Saint Basil, precisely the way he sees the knowledge of God.

Throughout his *On the Holy Spirit*, Saint Basil strengthens the idea that the knowledge of God cannot happen without the Holy Spirit, as a Person of the Holy Trinity. He often calls on the authority of the Scripture, as well as the authority of the Sacred Tradition. Although there are features of the Tradition that have been preserved either through written or oral channels, the author believes that the Church Fathers have faithfully followed the meaning of the Holy Scripture, starting from its unveiled character. He defends the oral characteristics of the Sacred Tradition, considering them to be held harmoniously, and together they offer an overview on Christian teachings. Extremely important for these are the confessions of Saint Irenaeus, Saint Clement of Rome, to which he appeals in order to justify adherence to tradition. These confessions are a source of knowledge for Saint Basil. The confessions of the Apostles and of the Church Fathers are sources of the knowledge of God. We must state that Saint Basil makes these claims because he presupposes the inspired, unveiled character of the Bible. This was seen as the Word of God, not just a sapiential story with no anchorage in transcendence.

Murray Hogg speaks about the role of the Holy Spirit as an epistemic agent in the process of the knowledge of God, and this role could only be achieved through the lens of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. He poses the question in what way the Holy Spirit is a source of the knowledge of God, and if He is, then how does He, as a source of knowledge, relates to the five categories of knowledge, highlighted by the contemporary epistemology. He believes that Saint Basil overlooks motivation-rationality, introspection and memory, underlining just the role of confession and perception in understanding the work of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit may be understood through the lens of confessing, then this assumes one's ability to perceive it. This implies that those, whose confession we consider to be true, understood the works of the Holy Spirit in a direct, inspired way, not just a discursive,

metaphorical way. He did not work only in the past, but is alive and present in the Church today. The sources of knowledge are confession and perception, and the question which needs an answer is the one tied to the structure of knowledge.

William Alston⁴ tries to analyse the religious experience. He claims that religious experience may be perceived through three ways:

- the experience of God as an answer to the appeal through prayer;
- the experience of God mediated by another activity;
- the direct, unmediated experience of God.

Murray Hogg⁵ thereby concludes that there are four ways through religious experience that may give rise to a process of forming faith:

1. a person forms his belief based on the confession of others;
2. a person has an experience which finds its explanation in a religious faith;
3. a person forms his religious faith as a result of the mediated experience of God;
4. a person forms his religious faith as a result of the direct, immediate and unmediated experience of God.

Saint Basil claims that we cannot speak about a knowledge of God in the absence of the Holy Spirit, since He reveals the Triune God. The Cappadocian Father also affirms the importance of unwritten tradition, understood as a confession of the strengthening of the knowledge of God. Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity plays a pivotal role in Christian tradition. The name of the persons pertaining to the Holy Trinity represent themselves a form of knowledge for people, as they refer a certain reality⁶. Saint Basil believes that the knowledge of God may be obtained through the path of the Sacred Tradition, specifically through the Trinitarian formula, spoken during the Sacrament of Baptism, formula which shows the graceful presence of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is that under which ministry believers must

4. W. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London 1991.

5. M. Hogg *The Knowledge of God: John's Gospel and Contemporary Epistemology*, Melbourne School of Theology (Master Thesis), 2011.

6. See D. G. Robertson, "A Patristic Theory of Proper Names," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83 (2002), pp. 1-19.

stay when reading the Holy Bible or other books that are related to the Sacred Tradition, but also when praying. Murray Hogg believes that the Cappadocian Father does not approach the importance of Tradition in a reductionist manner. One example of reductionism is that in which a confession is considered authentic and good enough, simply because it has been delivered by a person with authority, without the presence of other sources. Reductionist theories related to confessions tend to underline their lack of credibility, while non-reductionist theories tend to highlight their credibility. He does not justify the work which the Holy Spirit makes known to people through an appeal to other sources, but claims that the author of the knowledge of God is himself. He is the source through which we can get to know Him. From here we can deduce the inspired character of the Holy Bible and Sacred Tradition.

Murray Hogg becomes aware of an important question, to which he addresses the proper answer. If the epistemic work of the Holy Spirit is fundamental, how the Tradition does not bear the imprint of reductionism? The answer would be to see that the confession which relates to the Tradition is not itself a source of knowledge, but a channel through which knowledge is being transmitted.

In other words, God transmits Himself through confessions, not confessions themselves, as if they were purely human creations, acceptable through arguments of the type *magister dixit*, they are the source of the knowledge of God.

Murray Hogg believes that Saint Basil has a holistic vision with respect to the knowledge of God, not a fundamentalist one. It is holistic, in the sense that the same faith might appear from different angles. Faith may be justified not only on the basis of the Holy Bible, but also on the basis of the Sacred Tradition. Furthermore, Saint Basil encourages the important role of virtues in the process of the knowledge of God. This aspect made Murray Hogg speak about an epistemological perspective over virtues. He observes the important role given to intellectual virtues: caution, discerning, and, through opposition, amending contrasting sins.

Wood notices the importance of the virtues pertaining to the intellectual side, underlining it in the works of Aristotle and Augustin. The intellectual concerns are important because the character of a person and what he

can become relates to this fact⁷. We can observe the important role which Saint Basil offers to virtues pertaining to the intellectual realm, considering all that relates to the Christian traits, and forming the faith, is the expression of growth of these virtues. The idea according to which thought induces feelings and behaviours was emphasised on the basis of studies and the cognitive-behavioural focus in psychology. From an epistemological point of view, just as Hogg shows us, knowledge plays a crucial part in the work *On the Holy Spirit*. He concludes that Saint Basil does not have a reductionist vision, and considers the author of the revelation to be God Himself, revelation transmitted through the Holy Trinity and Sacred Tradition. A major element of his epistemology is the role played by virtue, the Christian character being of utmost importance in the process of redemption. The knowledge of God refers to the person as a whole. Highlighting the dignity of the person, Saint Basil the Great says that there is a model of the cosmic order in each of us, in which we can contemplate the wisdom of the Creator. In order to fulfil the purpose of each man, Christians must have Christ as a model, and the Holy Spirit as the one assisting them in the process of salvation. The idea of equality amongst humans can be seen in Saint Basil's vision. He promotes the types of relationships from the primary Church as a model for believers. The communion in love of all believers is being mirrored in the social perspective of Saint Basil.

Saint Basil has made a decisive contribution to the understanding of ontological and gnoseological meanings of the relations between essence and divine energy. Although this difference had been emphasised by Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Basil develops it in his disagreement with Eunomius. Although Arians thought that created beings cannot understand divine nature, Eunomus thought this to be possible. Basing his ideas on the difference between the nature of God and his energies, followers of Eunomius have also revised Arian ontology. In other words, while Arians accepted two different ontological categories, Eunomius highlights three categories:

- unborn (Father);

7. W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology-Becoming Intellectual, Virtuous, Contours of Christian Philosophy*, IVP Academic, 1988.

- begotten (Son);
- created (every other creature, including the Holy Spirit).

The difference between begotten and created, which ontologically distinguishes the Son from the Holy Spirit, resides in the fact that the begotten has come to exist through the energy of the Father, the unborn, while created beings came to exist through the lens of the born Son.

On this basis, the essential relations between the persons of the Holy Trinity have been excluded. Consequently, the two methods developed by Eunomius derive from the difference between begotten-unborn, and the second relation Son-Holy Spirit. The Pneumatomachi did not accept these methods, nor the Eunomian ontology and gnoseology.

According to Saint Basil, the transcendence of God has not only ontological dimensions, but gnoseological ones as well. In contrast to Eunomius, who considers God's transcendence as a source of the knowledge of Him, Saint Basil considers it as a source of the inability to understand it.

The unborn does not represent the essence of God, but only His manner of existing. Although God is unknowable in His essence, this does not mean agnosticism, because He communicates with the world through His uncreated energies.

The gnoseological significance of the Revelation of God in the world through His energies cannot be understood outside the relation between this and man. Divine purification and enlightenment are methods through which man can get to know God.

In this light, Saint Basil offers an answer to the way through which knowledge and faith can be harmonised. This answer emerged as a result of the dialogue between Eunomius and orthodox teaching. Followers of Eunomius considered the knowledge of the divine Nature as the basis of their whole theology. The knowledge of Essences precedes faith in them.

What came first? Knowledge or faith? To these questions, Saint Basil gives a theological and philosophical answer. For example, to understand the naming of a word, we must first believe it is named in such a way, then, by learning, we may use the term correctly. In theological gnoseology, the purpose and the substance of faith is identical with that of knowledge. Therefore, both faith preceding knowledge and knowledge preceding faith are valid.

“If Saint Basil seems to lean towards knowledge as being prior to faith, he does so in the light of that which has been discovered by God with respect to His existence”⁸.

The existence of this initial knowledge is the premise of faith in God. From here, we can deduce that this is not irrational or arbitrary, but based on rational support, consisting in deducting the existence of God from the knowledge of His creation.

Seen from a different perspective, faith precedes the knowledge of God, which cannot be attained through sense organs, but through intellect, endowed with the capacity to believe. For Saint Basil, faith is necessary before Baptism, because salvation comes not only through grace, but also through faith.

Knowledge and faith are interconnected, forming a unity, both being supported by divine energies. Knowledge was seen as a purely cognitive faculty of the human mind, independent of God, and that is when a split between faith and knowledge happened. For the quoted author, knowledge and faith are inseparable from the relationship between man and God. Knowledge, faith and worship represent three stages of the relationship with God. Only in worship do faith and knowledge accomplish their theological goal and real purpose.

C. Taxonomies of contemporary gnoseology with respect to religious and scientific language

Postmodern philosophy reduces language to the statute of code, the truth being nothing more than a statement of public opinion. Ian Barbour identified four types of rapports between the language of scientific knowledge and religious language:

- conflict;
- independence;
- dialogue;

8. G. Martzelos, “The Significance of the Distinction Between Essence and Energies of God According to St. Basil the Great”, in: *Divine Essence and Divine Energies*, ed. K. Athanasopoulos and C. Schneider, James Clarke and Co Ltd, Cambridge 2013, pp. 149-157.

- inclusion.

Arthur Peacocke developed a typology, underlining the fact that science must generate a metaphysic, the basis on which theology may be formulated on. In 1985, Nancey Murphy imported Niebuhr's typology with respect to the relation between Christianity and culture, and applied it to the relation between science and religion. According to Murphy, theology can transform not only culture, but science, as well.

In 1990, John Haught formulated another typology⁹:

- conflict;

- contrast;

- contact;

- confirmation (both science and religion consider the universe a rational structure, and the human mind can understand a part of the vastness of the world).

Haught's analysis has been developed by Wilen Drees and Mikael Stenmark. Wilen Drees believes that new knowledge influences traditions, experiences and religious knowledge. Stenmark suggests a model of reconciliation between science and religion. The above-mentioned authors have developed a number of models of dialogue between religion and science:

a) The scholastic model refers specially to speculative, academic theology. Both theology and science are academic disciplines, which is why we may speak of an interdisciplinary dialogue.

b) Economic personalism supposes a dialogue between believers and economic agents with respect to the morality of certain economic operations. Economists earned an overall view over the world, the others a knowledge of human interactions in business. In order to attain a unity between economy and religion, we must have a theological anthropology first.

c) Transdisciplinarity – that which is discovered at the same time both within a discipline, as well as outside it. Trans- and interdisciplinarity are complementary. The first tries to overcome binarity and oppositions in order to create a space for communication.

9. Dr. Sanda, Luana Alixandra Smărăndoiu, C. Munteanu, "The Dialogue between Science and Religion: a Taxonomic Contribution", *Religions* 8 (3) 35 (2017), pp. 1-18.

Transreligiousness breaks down in axiology. Beyond binarity, there is a third part, the indescribable which transcends duality. It is about the Creator behind reality, Creator of reality. He is beyond any experience, description or mathematical reason.

d) Personalist model – focused on spiritualising reason. Knowledge is not possible in the absence of Revelation. This type of knowledge originates in the way the Church Fathers have understood knowledge.

Saint Basil the Great remains a model for living, model for cultural refinement, model for philanthropy, model for service for the entire Orthodoxy. His work remains an ever-flowing source of inspiration and authentic theology.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ἡ γνώση τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπὸ τὸ φῶς τῆς γνωσιολογίας
στὸν ἅγιο Βασίλειο τὸν Μέγα

Alexandru Nicoară καὶ Bogdan Ionescu, *δρ. Θεολογίας*
Πανεπιστήμιο τῆς Κραϊόβα

Ἡ γνώση τοῦ Θεοῦ ἢ Θεογνωσία, ὅπως λέγεται στὴ Δογματικὴ Θεολογία, εἶναι στὴν ὀρθόδοξη πνευματικότητα ὁ θεμελιώδης σκοπὸς τῆς ζωῆς. Γιὰ τὴ Βυζαντινὴ Ὀρθόδοξη Ἀνατολὴ δὲν εἶναι μίᾳ ἀπλῆ πράξη ἢ ἓνα συγκεκριμένο ὀρθολογικὸ ἔργο γνώσης, ἀλλὰ σχετίζεται μὲ τὴν ἀσκητικὴ προσπάθεια τοῦ πιστοῦ καὶ ἐξαρτᾶται ἄμεσα ἀπὸ τὴν ἀγάπη τοῦ ἀνθρώπου γιὰ τὸν Θεὸ καὶ ἀντιστρόφως.

Ὁ Μ. Βασίλειος, μέσα ἀπὸ τὴν τεράστια θεολογικὴ του παιδεία, ἀναπτύσσει καὶ τελειοποιεῖ τὴν Τριαδικὴ θεολογία τοῦ ἁγίου Αἠθανασίου τοῦ Μεγάλου. Ἀπὸ τοὺς Καππαδόκες Πατέρες ὁ ἅγιος Βασίλειος φέρει τὸν τίτλο τοῦ Μεγάλου, ὄντας τέλειος διανοούμενος, πνευματικὸς ἄνθρωπος, λειτουργὸς καὶ ὀργανωτὴς τῆς μοναστικῆς ζωῆς.

Ἡ αὐθεντικὴ γνώση συνεπάγεται ὅτι μίᾳ ὀρισμένη κοινωνία δὲν ἀποτελεῖ μίᾳ ἀτομικιστικὴ ἢ ἐγωκεντρικὴ γνώση. Στὸ πλαίσιο αὐτὸ

είναι απαραίτητο να κατανοήσουμε τον γνωσιολογικό ρόλο του Ἁγίου Πνεύματος. Ἡ γνώση τοῦ Θεοῦ μᾶς δίνεται ἀπὸ τὸ Ἅγιο Πνεῦμα ὄχι μόνο μέσῳ Αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ μέσῳ καὶ τῶν Τριῶν Προσώπων ποὺ μοιράζονται τὴν ἴδια ἀγάπη. Μία σημαντικὴ πτυχὴ ποὺ τονίζει ὁ Μ. Βασίλειος εἶναι ὅτι δὲν δίνει λογικὴ ἢ ὄντολογικὴ προτεραιότητα στὸ Πρόσωπο ἔναντι τῆς θείας Φύσεως. Βεβαιώνει τὴν ἰσότητά τῶν τριῶν Προσώπων τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος, ποὺ εἶναι τρεῖς διακριτὲς ὑποστάσεις σὲ μία οὐσία. Ὁ Μ. Βασίλειος ἐπιβεβαιώνει τὴν ἰδιαίτερη σημασία τῆς Ἁγ. Γραφῆς καὶ τῆς Παράδοσης στὴ διαδικασία τῆς γνώσεως τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Στὴν πραγματεία του *Περὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος*, ὁ Μ. Βασίλειος τεκμηριώνει ὅτι ἡ γνώση τοῦ Θεοῦ δὲν μπορεῖ νὰ ὑπάρξει χωρὶς τὸ Πρόσωπο τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος, ποὺ ὅλα τὰ καθαγιάζει καὶ τελειοποιεῖ.