

---

# THE UNIVERSE TRANSCENDED GOD'S 'PRESENCE IN ABSENCE' IN SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

Alexei V. Nesteruk \*

Department of Mathematics, University of Portsmouth, Buckingham Building, Portsmouth,  
PO1 3EH, UK

(Received 5 April 2005)

---

## Abstract

Theology and science, in their dialogue, both attempt to deal with God's presence in the universe in his actual absence. Without a careful clarification of the meaning of this 'presence in absence' the sense of the dialogue cannot be established. This is the reason why in this paper we attempt to express the problem of 'presence in absence' along the lines of the eastern Orthodox theological apophaticism by employing conceptual tools of phenomenological philosophy. The discussion is linked to the issue of transcendence in cosmology and its possible theological meaning. It is anticipated that all attempts of the scientific discourse to "remove" the dichotomy in God's 'presence in absence' by pointing towards some ultimate reality cannot be fulfilled, but man can theologially overcome the tension through the transcending mediation between the created and uncreated.

*Keywords:* presence in absence, apophaticism, transcendence, cosmology, subjectivity, repentance

---

## 1. The inference to God from the facticity of the human subjectivity

When, in philosophy, it is asserted that God is *absent*, one usually exercises either an argument that to prove the opposite (i.e. God's existence and then *presence*) is impossible (Kantian philosophy), or that the notion of God which is effected in the course of ascension from the empirical series of causation to their accomplishing *telos*, must be bracketed in order to avoid the temptation to ontologise this God (classical phenomenological philosophy [1]). Theology, in regard to both of these cases, manifests a certain suspicion to any affirmation or denial of God, because it claims that the living God who is worthy of worship is mysteriously present in this world but he is *present* in his actual *absence* from this world. God permeates the world, but He is not in the world. One can reverse this statement by saying that the world is in God being held by

---

\* e-mail: Alexei.Nesteruk@port.ac.uk

God through his uncreated energies. This expresses the essence of *panentheism* [2]. Eastern Orthodox apophaticism affirms the unknowability of God if one attempts to predicate about Him in terms of the earthly definitions. But it does not deny God's presence in the world in the form of its mysterious absence. God is present in the universe, but since this is 'presence in absence', any affirmation of this paradoxical situation will lead the human mind to antinomies, so that for expressing God's 'presence in absence' one can use all sort of metaphors and allegory.

It is important to stress, however, that even in the most influential Patristic writers, the methodology of apophaticism, which elucidated the paradox of presence and absence of God in the context of faith, was usually exercised on the level of relations between the world and God. What is important here is that, in spite of the fact that the context of apophatic reasoning assumes faith in God who cannot be subjected to objectivising tendencies of discursive reason, one observes that the natural attitude with respect to the world and God is exercised by theologising consciousness, which poses both God and the world beyond itself. The facticity of consciousness, which is involved in apophatic theologising, is not questioned in spite of the fact that any predicament about God has sense only in so far as this same subjectivity is related to God and the world, and they in turn are related to the facticity of human subjectivity. This transformation in our attitude to the problem of 'presence in absence' of God in the context of human subjectivity corresponds to a phenomenological turn in our religious thought. In this case the question about presence or absence of God in any discourse will have to receive its answer, not through studying nature (as objects) but rather through the perception of the presence of personhood in this discourse.

Regrettably, we should state that in many aspects of scientific discourse the living presence of personhood is lost and the facticity of human life and consciousness is not reflected and articulated. Hence any attempt to infer to God with the background of personhood's absence leads to no more than a philosophical construction which has no personal qualities of the living God and which, thereby, can be easily "deconstructed" either by all sorts of transcendental criticism or phenomenological reduction. But the true and living God-Trinity, whose name is Love, is beyond definitions and their deconstructions, being "the continuous eruption into being of those myriad forms, the active *that*ing and *is*ing of everything which emerges into consciousness in the experience of wonder" [3].

Contemporary cosmology, as well as science in general, has to face the paradox of human subjectivity in the universe. This paradox was explicitly formulated in philosophical thought by E. Husserl and rephrased later by many thinkers across philosophy and theology. See more details, for example, in [4-8]. On the one hand the universe pre-exists as substance and the ultimate ontology of being is thought to be the ontology of this substance; then the mode of existence of human beings in the universe is treated no more than a variation of this impersonal substance, so that one has a sheer absence of personhood. On the

other hand there is a different intuition about the *living presence* of personhood in all articulations of the universe. The objects and entities in the universe appear not as external environment but as the manifestation of the living presence of human subjectivity (as the dative of manifestation) in the universe that actually makes all these things *beings*. The paradox if it is seen philosophically manifests the tension between nature and hypostasis in the human condition. (On a difference between nature and hypostasis, see my book [9]). In a non-religious context this difference can be paralleled with the difference between the *empirical ego* and *transcendental ego* [10].

In the natural attitude the presence of persons is not seen: persons are disintegrated, persons are *absent* because of that necessity which is dictated by the natural attitude. But it is exactly through this absence that the philosophical and theological reason (which works in a phenomenological attitude) can anticipate the *presence* of personhood. In a way the paradox of human subjectivity in the universe is just another incarnation of a deep metaphysical and theological antinomy of personhood: *its presence through absence* [11].

If the perception of personhood, with its facticity of consciousness of being is lost, then the state of affairs of the universe devoid of personhood points towards its abysmal separation from God, so that the sense of an impersonal Absolute, must create a fear of a spiritual deviation and soteriological separation from the Triune God. However, the fear of an intentional withdrawal from God can initiate a different intentionality in a being, which while being emptied from the living presence can start to long for God, for God's 'presence in absence'.

Thus in this paper we attempt an ascension to God not from the world, but from persons. We employ cosmology in order to demonstrate that its theories empty the grandeur of the living presence and reduce it to sheer presence of impersonal substance. In this sense the value of cosmology for the theology of the living God is very limited. However, if cosmology is seen as a spiritual exercise of an intentional withdrawal from God, by means of emptying personhood in the conditions of "keeping one's mind in hell and despair not" [12] (this expression is a famous teaching of St. Silouan the Athonite related to his spiritual struggle to acquire the living presence of God in the conditions of deprivation of grace), then the exercise of absence of God through absence of personhood can invoke the feeling of the loss of God, and hence reinstate the search for 'presence in absence' of God. But this will be the way of repentance, prayer and liturgy, which will never remove the facticity of 'presence in absence' but which will mediate and remove the tension between them.

## **2. From pseudo-transcendence in the cosmology of the Big Bang to the apophatic recovery of personhood**

When cosmology deals with the so called past of the universe, a characteristic displacement of the self of cosmologists takes place when they descend by means of scientific mediation into the remote stages of the early universe; the very intentionality of a cosmologist attempts to grasp the meaning

of such a condition of the universe where no incarnate self was possible. The intentionality of the living being directs itself into the hell of nothing-ness, where all imaginable forms of life and intelligence could not exist. One immediately feels here a non-human flavour to this enterprise and its intrinsic spiritual contradiction. The more the self advances towards the Big Bang, the more it intends the fundamentally non-human and in so doing it inevitably loses all human qualities, in the sense that they disappear from theory of the Big Bang; by acquiring conceptually the impersonal physical content of the universe the self, its consciousness, exercises a kind of an *empty* intention, which will never be filled and fulfilled because of the infinite advance in the disclosure of the universe.

What is interesting, however, is that, through a persistent exercise of this empty intentionality, the cosmological mind makes manifest the notion of the Big Bang as a “*telos*” of cosmological explanation, a *telos* whose meaning is to describe the origin of the universe as if it took place in the past. At the same time, being a *telos* of cosmological research which advances forward in time, it manifest in a different way its intrinsically complex nature, because the Big Bang, is allegedly placed in the physical past. Here we paradoxically speak about Big Bang as a “*telos*” of cosmological explanation, namely, to understand the present state of affairs in the universe by modelling a unifying principle of all multitude of cosmic events and objects in the remote hypothetical past, the sense of whose unfolding is directed to the future. But cosmological thinking does not anticipate its own intention for the Big Bang as a “teleological principle” of the working of mind itself. Hence the meditation of the Big Bang is exercised in the form of intentionality of the remote hypothetical past, but not as a centre of its disclosure acting from the future.

Phenomenologically and theologically one thus finds an incessant urge of the human soul to find the impersonal foundation of the world at the expense of losing the sense of uniqueness and identity of every particular person as radically distinct from any impersonal state of physical matter. On a psychological level one must say that those philosophising cosmologists who believe that through studying the alleged origin of the universe they touch upon the sacred truth (which points towards God), in fact, dissolve themselves in the abyss of non-human physics, devoid of any humanity and hence of any spiritual and soteriological meaning. Such a cosmologist-philosopher begins to predicate about the universe in esoteric and non-existential language, which is accessible only to those who follow this cosmological gnosis. Paradoxically, however, this predication of the universe still takes place within the human condition, i.e. in rubrics of the incarnate consciousness. This simple fact disappears from the cosmologists’ sight, cosmologists who sometimes believe that the asserted ultimate reality of the past universe has more relevance to the truth of existence than the variety of mundane experience and that it is this reality that fills one’s life with content and meaning.

Then a relevant theological question is: what are the spiritual consequences of this displacement of the self and effective withdrawal of

personhood? Can this affect the whole of human nature in order to influence a spiritual ability to differentiate between good and evil, between light and darkness, between life and death, between being and non-being? Does the dissolution of personhood in the excessive appreciation of the impersonality of the Big Bang lead, on a theological and hence existential level, to the diminution of communion with God? The answer to these questions can be given by pointing towards cosmic tendencies of ancient Hellenistic philosophy (as well as all sorts of contemporary paganism) when the human soul attempted to submit itself to some impersonal cosmic or demonic forces present in created nature. The danger of this “lure of cosmos”, using the words of N. Berdyaev [8, p. 93], is that human soul is in danger of being enslaved by those forces, so that the deposit of human freedom as part of the divine image in man is lost.

The natural attitude of a cosmologist drives him away from an existential question about the facticity of humanity and human subjectivity which is seen as just the prolongation and extension of the physical into biological and then psychological; it is a result of so called “evolution”, a blind game of chance and necessity among particles, fields etc. The theological sense of this is that cosmology is fundamentally incapable of transcending the facticity of the physical in order to contemplate the purposes and ends of the universe which are disclosed to humanity not through its ability to sense and think, but through its ability to feel the tragedy of existence and creaturehood, through its ability to contemplate communion with the Other of the world in a hypostatic mystical way of fear and love. It is this inability to transcend towards God that is substituted by a surrogate of transcendence towards the substance of the Big Bang. In the past some scientists and theologians used the Big Bang theories to affirm some creationist ideas or to make some scientific inferences about God [13], or to deny God on the grounds of the self-sufficient evidence of cosmological theories [14]. But what happens here seen through the eyes of spiritual phenomenology is something opposite to that which theology attempts to teach about the end and purposes of creation. As we have seen the Big Bang proves to be a teleological idea of the ultimate foundation of the world in a form of impersonal substance. This obscures the central point of Christian spirituality, namely that the *telos* of humanity, which involves the world in its own teleology, is not the origin of humanity but its eternal salvation, so that the universe as such can be treated merely as an event in the history of salvation and the meaning of its existence as well as ours comes from the eschatological future.

Cosmology attempts to overcome the mystery of personhood's ‘presence in absence’ in the universe by reducing it to sheer absence through the acquisition of the presence of the underlying impersonal substance and attempts to personalise the universe by subjecting it to the ambitions of the mathematised human reason. It wants the universe to be known across its span in space and time in order to make the universe as a whole ‘present in its presence’. But to achieve the ‘presence in presence’ of the universe would mean to understand not only its initial conditions and hence its identity, its ultimate purpose, but, in fact, the *logos* of its creation (the movements of the “mind of God” in a Western

parlance). This would mean in turn the overcoming of the tension and paradox ('presence in absence' of God) in a religious sense, which, according to Patristic writers, can only be achieved on the grounds of mystical union [15]. Cosmological research can be treated as para-eucharistic work, if it is involved in communion in a deep ecclesial sense. But this requires the activation of the intentionality of the Spirit through which the abysmal detachment from God will be revealed if one places the truth of living in the Big Bang, and through which ontological repentance will be evoked leading ultimately to the recovery of lost personhood on the grounds of man's *will* (not just knowledge) to attain communion with God through inner prayer and the Eucharist.

Humanity as personhood is not content with the presence of beings in the world as they are given to it empirically. Man attempts to understand the underlying meaning of things not only through what can be called their "nature", but through the purposes and ends of these beings as they stand with respect to place and goals of humanity in creation. This understanding is not what can be expressed physically and biologically; it is sustained by humanity's ideals and religious aspirations, which portray man as the crown of creation made in the image of God. Hence in a God-like fashion humanity wants to recognise all sorts of beings (either simple physical objects, including the very Big Bang, or living organisms) not according to their nature (which is the objective of scientific research) that is according to their compelling empirical or theoretical givenness, but as results of humanity's free will. The analogy comes from St. Maximus the Confessor's discussion on whether God knows created things according to their nature. His answer is negative: God knows things according to his will: "...when Christians were asked by some outsiders puffed up with their learning, how they can claim God knows existent things...and that he knows intellectual being intellectually and sensible things sensibly, they replied that he neither knows sensible things sensibly nor intellectual things intellectually. For it is out of question that the one who is beyond existent things should know things in the manner proper to beings. But we say that God knows existent things as the products of his own acts of *will*..."[16]. Humanity's free will is capable of exercising the freedom of either attaining the fullness of life and existence, or of failing of doing this by alienating itself from relationship and communion. But human freedom is linked to communion with God, so that by subjugating that truth which is gained on the grounds of the scientific, to the desire for truth of existence originating in communion with God, humanity exhibits its hypostatic essence, that is its personhood, through the tragic paradox of the presence of the truth of communion in its actual absence in the empirical and theoretical. Humanity as personhood prefers to express its own presence by appealing to the truth of God in the conditions of its own incapacity to overcome the absence of personhood in science. Humanity makes this effort as an alternative to being contained by nature, of being comprehended by some object-oriented thinking. It does not want to be manipulated through circumscribability and individualisation, which are inherent in spatio-temporal forms of creation. It is in this sense that humanity as personhood longs for the truth of existence that is *in*

this world—through man—but not *of* this world. This longing points toward the *telos* of all creaturehood, in which the paradox of the truth of existence present in its absence will have to be finally resolved.

This shift in humanity's attitude, according to its will, to look at science not as at a dispassionate enterprise unfolding the realities of the surrounding world, but as the activity of human subjectivity which attempts to understand and articulate through science its own facticity, to constitute personhood itself, can only take place in a paradoxical conditions of 'presence and absence' of personhood.

What we have here in philosophical terms is a kind of a phenomenological reversal in attitude to science: to use science as a hermeneutical tool for understanding humanity itself, to use the human image of the universe as a kind of mirror through which human subjectivity and persons constitute themselves. It is through this shift in attitude that the sense of science can be reversed: science is now seen not as the culmination of naturalism and rationalism in alienating human subjectivity and personhood from its own picture, but rather as that activity of the dative of manifestation, i.e. human self, which through its outward look establishes itself and transforms, according to its will, the absence of personhood in mathematised science to its explicit theological presence.

### **3. From substance of the universe to genuine transcendence through ontological repentance**

To act according to human will means not only to deconstruct the natural attitude, that is, to enclose cosmology in the context of existential faith and facticity of personhood, but is also a kind of a spiritual transformation which makes explicit the conditions of being abandoned by God while searching for the ultimate source of life in the Big Bang. This ontological transformation (in contradistinction to a possible epistemological shift in knowledge) can be called "ontological repentance".

When we reverse our cosmological insight and discover the presence of personhood, we unconsciously step into the ways of repentance. Do we need to repent about our being involved in cosmological research? The answer is "yes" and "no" depending on whether a cosmologist has evolved enough in order to see the abysmal separation from that living source of everything, which happens when he approaches the edge of the universe in the impersonal and lifeless Big Bang. It is here at this point of our search for the ultimate being of being, including our own being, that we are reduced to "zero". It does not mean that we lose personhood and existence, on the contrary personhood is in acute form present over there, but all layers of reality where the human discursive mind felt itself comfortable and potent lose their sense at once; because it is in these layers of reality that the reason indulges its own pride of being able to comprehend the surrounding world without God. It is here that the dissolution of personhood in the impersonal substance of the world takes place, and here that God withdraws from those who pursue a vain search for the allegedly highest and trans-personal

Absolute. Fr. Sophrony describes his experience of desire for God while being abandoned by God: “ Yes, being a sinner, I desire for God, the Holy God. In my memory I did not have any concrete acts from my past except knowledge of my apostasy from God, Whom I knew in my childhood and early youth. He deviated from me when I moved aside from Him towards a mad search for another, allegedly highest and trans-personal Absolute” [17].

In order to know about God, one’s mind should descend inside the hellish furnace of the Big Bang in order to realise all emptiness of impersonal being. Only then becoming aware about the Big Bang as merely a lure of the evil one, who wants to distract and detach our consciousness from the reality of it hypostatic incarnate existence, is it that human consciousness attempts to acquire back itself as existence in a concrete person. But having divested itself, i.e. cleansing itself from all sorts of contents about impersonal substance, hypostatic consciousness realises the whole scale of the paradoxical tragedy of its own existence: on the one hand, being incarnate consciousness, it exists in the context of substance of the world, but is not rooted in this substance; on the other hand it does not understand the foundations of its own facticity: it feels itself brought into being without knowing its reasons and motives. It is through this acute feeling of ontological loneliness and an incessant desire to enquire about the foundations of personal life, that some other channels of human communication with reality at large experience transformation so that the intentionality of repentance comes forth, and at this initial stage one can claim that faith in God is called out in a being by the power of God and his Spirit. In a way the very fact of awareness of the loss of personhood and the mystery of its own facticity comes from acquiring a sort of faith. To feel loneliness in the universe and abandonment by God one needs faith: “those who do not believe in God do not know the meaning of being abandoned by Him” [17, p. 123].

And when a human being by the virtue of its fate is placed to contemplate the perspective of its finitude and finality, the perspective of its own dissolution and return into that substance from which it was born, at this very moment, man realises the scale of its own fallness and apostasy against God – that single and life-giving source which makes human life indeed the most valued thing in the universe. At this very moment a human being reduces itself to the zero of feeling alone and realising a tragic mode of existence of a person in a vast and hardly comprehensible universe without a link with God, in its own effective loneliness in being withdrawn from God, that God who is still present in his incomprehensible absence. This acute awareness of the mystery of life in personhood, which is devoid of any visible care from God and comprehension of its own facticity is described by Archimandrite Sophrony as “uncreated energy” [17, p. 119], as the arrival of the Divine Light, and the entry of the Spirit of God into the heart of a person: “...through the repentance given to me – even up to the extend when I hated myself - I unexpectedly for myself experienced a wonderful world, and uncreated light surrounded me, permeated through me and transformed me into light, and was giving to me in the Kingdom of God of

Love. The Kingdom to which 'there will no be end' (c.f. Matthew 18: 10-14)" [17, p. 144].

This entry of the Spirit acts also as the invocation through the repentant soul (so that the intentionality of the Spirit enters human cognitive life only through the ontological repentance in which the tragic place of hypostatic consciousness in the case of detachment from God is realised) of that God who is the real Father to all humanity and to the whole universe. Here the Spirit exercises its action in a human heart providentially: through the awareness of the tragic facticity of personal life and effective abandonment by God, the economy of the Spirit reveals itself tacitly by showing us God in the conditions when God withdraws from His phenomenality and is given to us through some mediated manifestations.

A moment of true vision, when man faces himself before the abyss of nothingness, when he perceives, through being providentially abandoned by God, all transitivity of cosmological being, this moment one can compare with that grace, which is given to a man for the first time, which enters the reality of the human heart when one is reduced to zero and when one is open those flows of Divine energies which transform the human constitution and when God, being initially absent in human life, comes back into consciousness of a man in the form of 'presence in absence'. Afterwards this 'presence in absence' becomes that stable phase in the human condition in which human freedom is subjected to a trial: freedom either to achieve the fullness of communion with God, or, alternatively, to reject God and to live blind life by being turned onto itself through following the cult of mere rationality.

The providence of God is disclosed exactly through the givenness of God to man in the form of 'presence in absence': knowing intuitively about God through all sorts of apophatic deconstructions of cosmology, by "touching" the Absolute in a shadow of unconfirmed belief, a human being does not see this Absolute, because of a natural reason that the grace of God cannot outflow towards that one constantly; it is given to a man only for a short period of time: "...we cannot survive the fullness of grace in our earthly existence; this is the reason why all appearances of God in his eternal glory are possible only for a very short moment." [17, p. 126]. This providential withdrawal of God as unavailability of His grace constantly, creates an acute sense of absence of God in spite of His presence.

#### **4. Withdrawal of God as the Authenticity of Transcendence**

Here we have to discuss the aspect of providential withdrawal of God from a different angle, namely that of the authenticity of the experience of God. As we mentioned before with reference to Fr. Sophrony, the bliss of the grace of God is a short-term experience, which never allows a recipient to contemplate its fullness and thus to acquire any complete knowledge of God. It is through this unavailability of the fullness of grace that God never discloses himself to a human being but only shows himself through manifestations that cannot be

phenomenalised. The basic *diaphora* between God and us is preserved, and it is this undisclosedness of God that makes his experience authentic and ever advancing. God has also to withdraw Himself in order to retain His own face (to preserve his hypostasis as he is in himself), for otherwise this face will be affected by the subjectivity of that one who attempts to see God. At the same time God is not absent completely and his face appear as a response to our call or invocation. But God's absence is important and imperative if he wants to retain his face as He is. If the accessibility of God were to be an easy exercise, then we could not be sure that the authenticity of Him would be intact in his emerging phenomenality. In other words the phenomenality of God assumes that He is withdrawn from his phenomenality in some obvious ways [18]. The phenomenalisation of God is achieved only through a struggle to recover the presence of God in his obvious absence. And the hope lies exactly in the fact that in order to be shown God must withdraw.

In the language of transcendence God in his transcendence (that is, being *different* from us) avoids phenomenality, i.e. he does not show himself as an object. God, who shows himself, must act as the self by giving the self and under the pressure of that givenness to show himself not as an object but as sheer manifestation (i.e. not as 'presence in presence', but 'presence in absence'). This is the reason why the authenticity of God follows from that self which manifests itself, shows activity inherent to hypostatic beings, i.e. the authenticity of God follows from his showing Himself as Person. In this case the phenomenalisation of God as manifestation is an event of a meeting between a human subject and the Person of that One who is giving himself.

If our meeting with God through his phenomenalisation in manifestations is an event, it is clear that it cannot be a product of any procession or production. An event itself as givenness happens on God's volition. For a human person it is important to make an effort to meet God in order for God to show himself (i.e. to phenomenalise God) in his manifestations. However it is here that one most important detail reveals itself, which makes overall sense of our considerations: that the phenomenalisation of revelation of God does not entail its showing as an object. God shows himself in his sheer manifestation that cannot be externalised, communicated or investigated. It can only be stated as having taken place, i.e. as an event with no underlying (outward) causation. (This is similar to the definition of hypostasis in E. Levinas, where the event is the act of contracting existing by an existent in which there is no transitive elements and relations to anything outside of it [19]).

The personal meeting with God, as we said before requires one to make an effort even in the conditions of a severe abandonment by God. Without this effort the spontaneity of grace can descend on a person only in very rare cases; but even in this case we do not want to say that the sheer manifestation of God can be caused or predetermined outwardly: for example, the practice of inner prayer in Christianity. In spite of the fact that Jesus prayer is recited with an intentional invocation of the presence of God, as such, it creates only a medium of the hope to gain the glimpse of grace through which the presence of God will

be somehow felt. But the fulfilment of this hope is not causally connected with acts of prayer. See on inner prayer, for example, a paper of Bp. Kallistos Ware [20]. If the meeting with God takes place this is truly an “event” with no transitive and relational features and one can say that the medium of the meeting with God can be characterised as his ‘presence in absence’. God withdraws himself in order to keep his transcendence. God is present in front of that one who prays, God shows himself in his manifestations, but this presence takes place in his actual absence, that absence which keeps God transcendent and which at the same time makes our experience of presence of God authentic. The withdrawal of God from the life of the one who prays unceasingly is a necessary condition for that one to exercise its freedom of transcendence, i.e. an attempt to “see” God in his sheer manifestation which becomes an ‘event of the hypostasised presence in absence’ contrary to abstract ‘presence in absence’ of God of philosophers. But even this showing up of God’s ‘presence in absence’ to that one in whose hypostasis it is manifested, is not something which can be communicated to the other, so that the manifestation of “presence in absence” is hypostatic through and through, i.e. it is available only to persons, but not to physical objects. Thus the withdrawal of God in this sense is a “condition” for his authenticity and uniqueness in personal events of revelation, and, at the same time, is the affirmation of his ‘presence in absence’ in our midst.

This line of thought clarifies from a certain angle the essence of the Eastern Orthodox theological apophaticism that we have mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The ‘presence in absence’ of God, being manifested and revealed only to persons in the effected hypostatic events, does not allow them to communicate their experience of the meeting with God in the conditions of his absence. ‘Presence in absence’ of God in a hypostatic event suspends all spatio-temporal modalities of the world through which that same ‘presence in absence’ is contemplated in an absolutely inexpressible way, where even terms presence and absence cannot be applied anymore because space and time disappear in God’s manifestations. This means that no demonstrated knowledge of these events can be developed, because knowledge cannot embrace the realm beyond earthly things. Hence to express their experience of this ‘presence in absence’ of God the Fathers of the Church and theologians feel free to use any symbolism and allegory. Compare this with some thoughts of St. Isaac the Syrian from the *Homily 51* in a different way expressing apophaticism in theology, by talking about the limits of the reason, in its attempts to grasp the realities of faith: “Knowledge adheres to the domain of nature... Knowledge does not venture to step over unto the domain which lies outside nature” [21]. That is why accurate designations can only be established concerning Earthly things. This is not the case, however, if the reason trespasses the boundaries of its legitimate sphere and attempts to discuss things that are not of this world. In this case it is “faith [that] makes its course above nature”, [21] such that “knowledge is united to faith and... lifted up from the service of earthly things towards the place of its creation, acquiring also other things” [21, p. 246] i.e. towards the things of the age to come which do not possess a true name but can

only be apprehended by simple cognition which is exalted “above all perceptibility” [21, p. 246], all signs, forms, all colours, and composite denominations. When therefore “knowledge elevates itself above earthly things and....faith swallows knowledge, gives anew birth to it, wholly spiritual” [21, p. 256], the fathers use, concerning this knowledge, any designations they like, for no one knows their real names.

It is in last mentioned sense that theology, understood Patristically as being experience of God in communion, always deals with different degrees of articulation of ‘presence in absence’. The longing for the ideal of replacing “presence in absence” by “presence in presence” of God, in fact, can lead only to the personalisation of “presence in absence” by transferring to it some unique and hypostatic qualities of that one who attempts to communicate with God and further mediation between “presence” and “absence” as the removal of tension between them. In the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor this corresponds to mediation between creation and God, not through removing the basic *diastema* between the world and the Divine, but through reconciliation of those divisions (*diairesis*) between the world and God, which were effected by the Fall. Maximus describes the attainment of this mediation as the “mystical union” with God, which does not remove the very dichotomy between presence in absence of God to a creature, but which mediates between this presence and absence. In order to preserve his authenticity God must keep the *difference* between Him and creation and thus he must manifest himself through withdrawal, i.e. through his “presence in absence”. This means that mediation between presence and absence, even if it is effected in a mystical union between a human creature and God, while removing all tensions between presence and absence and overcoming its paradoxical character, does not eliminate the dichotomy in presence in absence of God originating from the difference (*diaphora*) and distance (*diastema*) between God and the world. The perseverance in one’s desire to achieve union with God by mediating between God’s presence and his absence, is effected, nevertheless, in the conditions of the transcendent gulf between God and the world which forms for the discursive mind an antinomy about the one-way *diastema*, i.e. antinomy about God’s presence in absence [9, p. 104].

## References

- [1] E. Husserl, *Ideas. General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Tr. by W.R. Boyce Gibson, Collier Books, London, 1969, 58.
- [2] A. Peacock, *Introduction*, in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Reflections on Panentheism in a Scientific Age*, Ph. Clayton & A. Peacock (eds.), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2004, xviii.
- [3] P. Brockelman, *Human Studies*, **20** (1997) 287.
- [4] E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970, 179.
- [5] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1982, 72.
- [6] A. Dondeyne, *Contemporary European Thought and Christian Faith*, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, 1958, 10.

- [7] G. de Laguna, *On Existence and the Human World*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1966, 81.
- [8] N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, The Centenary Press, London, 1944, 95.
- [9] A. Nesteruk, *Light from the East: Theology, Science and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003, 112.
- [10] R. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, 112.
- [11] J. Zizioulas, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, **28** (1975) 401.
- [12] Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos. (Staretz Silouan 1866-1938)*, Mowbrays, London & Oxford: London & Oxford, 1973, 115.
- [13] W.L. Craig, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, **41(N1)** (2001) 17.
- [14] S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Bantam, London, 1988, 141.
- [15] L. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Open Court, Chicago, 1995, 404.
- [16] St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, 7, P.G. vol. 91, 1085B. English translation in: *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ. Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, Tr. by P.M. Blowers and R.L. Wilkien, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, 2003, 61.
- [17] Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *To See God as He Is*, (in Russian), Путем Зерна, Moscow, 139.
- [18] M. Zarader, *Phenomenality and Transcendence*, in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2003, 116.
- [19] E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1987, 42.
- [20] Bishop Kallistos (Ware), *The Power of the Name: the Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, revised ed. Fairaces Publication 43, Convent of the Incarnation, Oxford, 1986, 2.
- [21] A.J. Wensinck, *Mystical Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Amsterdam, 1923, 243.