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# THE MYSTERY THE LIMIT WHICH REVEAL ITSELF<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

The aim of this text is to draw attention to the necessity of recalibrating the relation between thought and feeling, mind and heart, as the basis of a harmonious relation between Science and Theology. The stress laid on the spirituality in the Eastern Orthodox tradition can constitute a theme of reflection and renewal for the deadlock of modern and post-modern rationalism. The mystery of divine mystery is the limit that reveals itself to the boundlessness of knowledge.

*Keywords:* light of knowledge, tradition, mystery, limit, revelation, knowledge

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*Never say all you hear,  
Never show all you know,  
Never do all you can!*  
(Father Paisie Olaru – *Sihla Hermitage*)

## 1. Introduction

Andrew Louth, an Anglican theologian converted to Orthodoxy in 1989, evokes a syntagma of T.S. Eliott *dissociation of sensibility – sensibility disunited* – referring to a malady which began in the XVIII century, a malady from which we have never recovered, a dissociation manifested in the way in which the refinement of the language of the XVIII century was no longer equal to a corresponding refinement of feeling but on the contrary. In other words, a dissociation between thought and feeling, mind and heart. That is a general split between reason and feeling, science and art, theology and spirituality, between the exact sciences and the humanities. Extended into Enlightenment, this

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dissociation will be rendered more serious in Romanticism, the final result being a rationalistic annihilation or historic-relativist annihilation of tradition and the humanistic and theological disciplines. Under the pressure of the epistemologic model of the Enlightenment, the humanistic and theological disciplines will tend to adopt imitatively the objective model of exact sciences [1]. Hence the common malady mentioned higher up, especially since, under the auspices of modernity, contemporary Theology has become a university science. The fact that the split between theology and spirituality is linked to the dissociation in our culture is confirmed by a linguistic detail. In contrast with us, the Greek Fathers used one and the same word both for Theology and spirituality: *theologia*.

That the logos was embodied is a fact. That modern man no longer believes in this fact is a proof of our insensibility to the transcendent. Having said that, the following questions demand being answered, beyond the scriptural illiteracy of those who maintain that the Bible postulated blind faith and places research on the stocks of infamy. Therefore, what is our position as regards the phenomenon of knowledge, what is our attitude in the process of research and discovery of scientific truth; how do we deal with its discovery, with our scientific gains? If we look at history and all around us we could say it is quite bad.

*The divine essence, in the plan of knowledge becomes inaccessible not only to man, but to all intellectual nature* [2]. We should begin from this truth when we seek in all honesty to understand the relationship between knowledge and Theology. Structurally, Orthodox Theology cannot slip metaphysically through the interval Science-Religion-Philosophy, as if the Embodiment of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity had not taken place, according to that hybrid mystical philosophy of the Renaissance, which renewing the framework of ancient religion, upgraded to its true place the Christian patrimony taking Theology out of the church [3].

Only by believing in the Son and receiving through Him the promise of the Holy Ghost, the faithful finds out who the Father is (Luke 10.22); only then in His Son does God recognize the Father as Father and that is why He Himself becomes the Son. Through the Son does the faithful receive the Holy Spirit and in the Consoler he contemplates the inexpressible beauty of the divine being; he feels the joy of an inexplicable tremor, sings within his heart the 'spiritual light' of the 'tabernacle light', becoming himself, clerical and beautiful. This 'spiritual light' is the light of the Tripartite Divinity Itself, the divine essence, which is not simply given, but gives itself. It is the 'light of knowledge' that began to brighten the world on the Birth of Christ, as we see in the lyrics in the Christmas hymn: "Christ Our Lord Thy Birth gave *the light of knowledge* to the world..." Whereas in another hymn sung at the Transfiguration we say: "Christ Our Lord Thou didst transform Thy Face showing the apostles Thy glory *within their limit of understanding*." Thus, as the hymn clearly says, we are dealing with *the limit* of knowledge. *The limit* is a philosophical approach of phenomenological type, *the mystery* from the viewpoint of a theological approach. From the point of view of coincidence and differences that draw a line

between the relations of the Church, Theology and Science with this *mystery/limit*, I think, we should embark upon a new approach.

## **2. Mystery and problem**

One of the ways in which reason operates is by solving problems. Being confronted by reality, man in seeking solutions isolates certain problems. Mathematics represents this faculty of reason. However, the solving of problems also supposes an exercise of imagination and quite frequently the mathematician looks upon his task in aesthetic categories and not only in utilitarian terms. The solved problems represent acquired knowledge, forming the basis of advancing science. The notion of progress involves leaving the past behind. Or, fundamentally speaking the humanities are known to return continuously to the great personalities of the past. Plato, Aristotle, continue to be discussed at present and the problems they raised do not admit solutions to determine us to abandon them and pass on to others.

Gabriel Marcel is of the opinion that there is a distinction between mysterious and problematic. The problem is something that must be dealt with when it blocks my way. It stands completely in my way. On the contrary a mystery is something I am engaged in, whose essence consequently does not stand in my way. It is as if in this zone the distinction between *inside me* and *in front of me* loses its meaning. A problem is a temporary obstacle and a correct answer is an attempt to remove it. On the other hand a mystery is different. It does not confront me. It envelops me. It does not keep me on the sideline. It draws me within itself. It is not a temporary barrier. It is the centre of my attention. Sometimes the problem and the mystery overlap. Sometimes we are confronted with a problem that plunges us into mystery. A problem conceals a mystery to the extent in which it may arouse ontological reverberations (for instance the survival problem) [4].

A mystery does not need to be resolved, we should share it. A problem is a thing I encounter which stands right in front of me but which I can separate and reduce – while a mystery is a thing I myself am engaged in and which cannot be thought of except as a sphere in which the distinction between me and in front of me loses its initial significance and value. Whereas a problem justifies an appropriate technique, depending on what it is defined, a mystery transcends by definition any imaginable technique. Undoubtedly a mystery can be degraded (logically and psychologically) to make it into a problem. However, Gabriel Marcel underlines that is an essentially vicious procedure whose sources perhaps must be sought in a corruption of intelligence [4, p. 132].

In other words the preoccupation for the mysterious is closer to the core of the humanities while at the core of exact sciences the preoccupation for the problematic is to be found. It is not a matter of dichotomy, but simply of a contrast.

The Romanian poet Lucian Blaga wrote somewhere: “I wander on the mountain peak. It is night, but my eyes have grown used to the darkness, I see at great distances, vaguely – it is true – however I see. I light a candle and, suddenly I see clearly two feet away, but nothing farther. Our healthy mind within the darkness of reality sees – unclearly what is true – in the distance and at great depths. Science lights its candle and, all of a sudden we see two feet away but no further.”

A problem can be solved, a puzzle can be solved, but a mystery, if it is indeed a mystery remains as such. We, Christians speak about the centre of our faith as being the mystery of God in Christ, meaning by this that the problem of existence, the mystery of ultimate reality, is truly a mystery that cannot be unveiled.

The centrality of a mystery is discussed by the pretence of any science and scientific method of controlling the way to truth. Then mysteries become problems, problems which must be solved and can be solved. A scientist can separate from a number of problematic things he is confronted with, the problems which are accessible to the methods at his disposal and which will be submitted to his instruments. The semi-darkness beyond this, which Blaga mentioned, is for the moment ignored. The humanities are concerned with what man has thought, understood and done. He is a person, and the liberty of a person, the liberty of his will leads to the mystery of the human being. When this mystery unravels, the humanities become social sciences. But if we recognize the mystery of the person, then we learn that in the humanities exists an engagement between people, in which the mystery of the other person raises a question mark and rouses the understanding of ourselves [1, p. 223].

The fundamental thing with which Christian Theology, as a way of seeking knowledge, can contribute to other ways of seeking knowledge is that it should hinder and resist the natural aspiration of the human mind to possess a clear distinct and transparent system [1, p. 225]. This, however cannot only be done through Tradition as a privileged point from which we can see the mystery of God which was revealed to Christ.

If the Holy Scriptures and all that the Church produces, through written or spoken words, through icons or liturgical symbols, or others, represent different ways of the expressions of Truth. Vladimir Losski is of opinion that *we correctly say unique and not uniform*. Tradition in its pure form has nothing formal. It does not impose on the human conscience formal guaranties of the truths of faith, but causes *their interior evidence* to be discovered. It is not the continuation of the Revelation, but the light that discovered it. It is not the word but the live breath, which makes the word to be heard at the same time as the silence it results from. It is not the Truth, but the transmission of the Spirit of Truth [...] We could define the pure notion of tradition saying that it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of Christ's Body the possibility to understand, receive, know the Truth in the Light which is his own and not only in natural light of human reason [5].

In the effort to rearticulate some natural relations between Theology and Science, we discover that both need, of course in a different measure, to re-evaluate the mystery dimension of the universe that is; to rediscover God as a presence. There are not our eyes that see. They persist stubbornly in transmitting received impressions, the retina is affected by a certain movement that is transmitted closer and closer and finally arrives at certain cells in the cerebral hemisphere. The cells vibrate; they are impressed and inexplicably and mysteriously, we perceive a colour. As long as there is a material movement, science explains everything; but it cannot explain the passing of movement in the psychic phenomenon. The word *psychic* generally used by everybody, even by positivists, is nothing but the confession of impotence. It is not necessary to be a physiologist to understand the radical difference between a material movement and the perception of a colour [6].

Abbot Moreux having been asked where is the place of the soul has replied: “Because our soul is the one which perceives and because it is immaterial, hence, boundless, the question referring to its location is senseless. It is as if you tried to situate in space the notion of triangle or circumference. What is immaterial is not in space. Our soul is where it acts. Do not ask me anymore about that, because I cannot answer you. We may definitely say that the soul usually acts through the medium of the brain, but it is not located only in this organ [...] I do not say that sensation is the act of the brain; I said it and I repeat that in order to feel we need the brain. That is how man is created: the movement in the brain is a necessary condition of feeling.” [6, p. 15]

It is a fact that our mind permanently struggles between antinomies. The reason fragments the universe, it undoes and splits everything and it is only in the mind of the anchorite inhabited by God that the curing of existence and healing of the world’s wounds are contained. The antinomy is the result of the fragmentation of the universe through reason, and its reconciliation and unity cannot be achieved but only beyond it. Where can this location be? I feel inclined to believe it is in the dogma. But not in the dogma understood as a norm, as a rule, but in the dogma as an intuitive truth, disclosed by the Revelation. The dogma is an axiom, obvious in itself, for the faculty of reason purified and strengthened by prayer and Christian deeds. It is the formulation of the Mystery as a limit that opens up. Dogma ceases where there is no antinomy, for we are dealing with a rational affirmation, with a scientific sentence, what need is there to believe any longer, what need is there any longer to be purified by prayer and deed? But where there is no dogma, religion ceases. And again we fall into the trap of reason, which cannot penetrate into the intimacy of the religious object and neither can it embrace it completely.

“In the near future, it is only mystic and sacramental Theology that can carry on a profound and productive dialogue with a Science which is becoming even more open towards the relation between the probable and mystery. Thus, mystery approached both by science and faith, could be perceived in an antinomic and fascinating way, as an inevitable basis of true knowledge, just because this knowledge is not confused with the certitude of self sufficient

objectivity, because the seeker/researcher himself is part of the mystery he is inside not outside.” [7]

### 3. Love and knowledge

Theology uses the term *kenoza* (from the Greek *κενωσις*, which means emptiness, state of piety, self effacement, humility) in connection with state of emptiness like that which Jesus Christ, the Son of God assumes in the act of Incarnation, as an act of obedience to God the Father. It is a state that can neither be understood nor described in words, belonging in its depth – profoundness to the unspeakable divine mystery. As Maxim the Confessor says, “*who could know how God became man and yet he remained God and how by remaining God, he was a real man.*” [Ambigua]

Apostle Paul, in the II<sup>nd</sup> Epistle to the Corinthians says it is due to the fact that the rich Son of God became poor for us, that we could share in His wealth, because that is how His wealth came to us (Corinthians II 8.9). Had he not descended to our possibilities of receiving His wealth, He would not have enriched us. Therefore, His descent is the condition of our go-ahead. The *Kenoza* of the Son of God cancels in human nature selfish disorders and mania. It also endows man with the desire for humility, meekness and tenderness through which harmony, respect and communication among people can be re-established. Father Staniloaie considers that through this humility of the Divine, the two values of human nature are re-established, eliminating the selfish, violence and coarseness manifested in the attitude of self-pride, which causes other people to be treated as objects. This state of the Divine assumed at the level of the human being, confers *another kind of power*. It is the power of the one who gives all, of the one who gives himself, the one who renounces any power over the others without asking for anything in exchange [8].

That is why I believe you cannot really study thoroughly the themes of knowledge only out of scientific curiosity. Keeping the distance they will always remain unknown. I adhere to another way of being a scholar or practising Science inseparable from Theology. Objectivity does not exclusively mean the necessary distance not to be contaminated or not to project on the object something of yourself, but the honesty of seeking relation to historic facts. Thus, the Incarnation is the very moment by which History is given a chance. It is not the recording of facts that is the measure of professional excellence, but their interpretation, the understanding of their significance and the impact on the present. Scientific facts should be understood within the scope of their genesis and aspiration. Nothing is sadder and more false than the manifest reductionism of interpretation that eliminates, as something negligible, the personal relation between God and man, as professed by the Incarnation.

God does not hide somewhere in the sky. His true Presence in creation must be recognized as a necessity, the only one able to articulate the open discourse that Theology descends to Science, in order that both may later ascend together to God. The mystery fulfilled by Christ – the personal unification of

consummate Divinity and mankind in its perfection – presents to us not only the supreme theological and philosophic truth: it is the very crux of universal history [9]. This is the model which was proposed to us from the very beginning. The reconciliation between Science and Theology based on the acceptance of God's actual presence in creation and not His deist isolation in transcendent, it would be like a reconciliation between spouses, which would remake the bodily harmony of the couple, according to the model offered to the Ephesians by St. Paul, *quoniam vir caput est mulieris, sicut et Christus caput ecclesiae - because the man is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church* (Ephesians 5.23).

We speak with such pathos about the prominence of love in Christianity. But what is this love, what is its fundamental function? The act in itself or knowledge? Knowledge is not an act of recording, but an act of *identifying* a subject with an object, you do not see what is, you see what you know, what you are familiar with. This fundamental truth we do not owe to scientific philosophy, but to mysticism. In order to see what it really is, you must first become yourself to see what it is.

“Love your Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your power, and with all your thoughts”; that means that nothing of what you feel and think should be orientated in any other direction but God: all your heart and thoughts should be directed to God, that is you should somehow experience ecstasy before God, which no longer allows you to think if there exists anything besides Him. All that is ‘you’ should be absorbed by God, the scope of all your activity. Every moment of your exertion should conduce only to this centre of orientation of all your spiritual powers. Therein lies the characteristic of love: love takes over. Love takes over and causes you to see everything that exists from a certain angle: all that exists is subordinated to the object of your love, it lives only in relation to this love. That means that you, with your inclinations, desires, your will in general and the unfolding of your forces, you are identified with the object in front of you. This identification is at the same time *experiencing*, experiencing the object which lies before you: you experience in such a manner, that having returned from this journey of identification with the outside object, you *have the possibility of rendering what you have experienced in conceptual formula*, and any experience translatable in conceptual formula is knowledge, once identifying yourself with God through love is God's knowledge.

That is why theologians should not be satisfied only by theoretical approach discourses about Divinity. They should practically experiment the union/dialogue with God. Therefore, their discourse is not valid through a simple epistemologic convention, but through a permanent practice, and which is ineffable, in fact. Finally, Theology is not something pure and simply related to education and erudition. It is sooner the feeling of the faithful mind combined with the correct position of the heart.

#### **4. On the hidden meaning of the Annunciation icon**

Being in New York almost 10 years ago, I repeatedly had the opportunity of enjoying an event, which stood at the head activity for three months at the Metropolitan Museum. The exhibition entitled 'The Glory of Byzantium' reunited values of the former Byzantium collected from all over the world. Among these items was an XI<sup>th</sup> century icon of the Annunciation which had come from Mount Sinai - Monastery of St. Catherine. The manner in which it was created was in keeping with the meaning and rigour of the event related in the Gospel of St. Luke. On the left the Archangel Gabriel stands leaving towards the direction of the Virgin Mary, blessing with his right hand aerially suspended on the threshold between worlds, in a lightning halt, on the verge of newly ascending to the heavenly hierarchies. His gestures both carrying the prestige of the authority of He who had sent him and the protective kindness of the 'guardian', destined to relieve the Virgin's circumspect doubt, points to the womb of the Pure Virgin Mary. On the right, Mary of Nazareth, sitting on a bench, half turned towards 'God's angel' who had intempestively made his appearance in the silence of the room, in her turn she has her right hand palm raised, as if she intended to stop the bewildering announcement. Her eyes are looking towards the sky where the Holy Spirit is on the point of casting the power of God Almighty. The whole composition is created in order to depict surprise, divine enlightenment that puts man to the test. The whole universe holds its breath, in an imponderable moment, lasting the length of a century. The angel expects Mary to speak. "So be it! May it be done according to your word!" In a fraction of a second the Incarnation occurs. Indeed the icon from Sinai monastery comprised all the subtleties of this dramatic act of the Annunciation, in which God consulted man's freedom inviting him to directly participate. Moreover, there was yet something else, the painting contains a mystery which cannot be perceived when looked upon from a normal distance, in the swiftness of pacing. It was only when you were in the close proximity of the icon, having stopped from your earthly 'gliding' and coming closer that you could perceive the soft touch of the paint brush deriving from the 'lights', through the hand of the theologian artist slightly outlined on Virgin Mary's womb, the ineffable body of Baby Jesus, blessing the world. This unusual epiphany had an overwhelming effect on he who looked closely at the respective icon having the gift of projecting the whole 'composition' in the space of eternity that made you immediately understand why the Mother of God, she and only she alone, is "more honoured than the cherubims and more greatly praised than the seraphs". The 'Annunciation' icon from Sinai had the gift of transfiguring the 'New World' in which it has temporarily existed, projecting the on-looker's sight to visualize it in its overwhelming path to Damascus.

We shall find that everything takes place at night in an austere room, if we reconstitute the corresponding sequence of the Annunciation in the world reputed film of Zeffirelli. While Virgin Mary is sleeping the windows suddenly blown aside by an unexpected gust of wind, heralding the surprising announcement. Everything is created in such a way that it is more brightening than surprising. Awakened suddenly, like all humans and confronted with the ‘unknown’, Mary has to assume an overpowering responsibility. Naturally, the situation bewilders and frightens her. That is not because Zeffirelli does not master his profession, but even he like many others, had overlooked a detail which we can easily notice in almost all the Orthodox icons of the Annunciation. In these, the Virgin Mary is not at rest and moreover she does not fall prey to sleep, as later Jesus disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane did. Sleep has dramatic consequences and the Orthodox icon evokes it only as the hypostasis of death. In most cases in Orthodox we shall notice on Mary’s left a ball of wool and somewhere in front of her a little box similar to those in which grandmother kept all the necessary things for sewing. The eastern tradition says that Mary was praying before the Archangel’s arrival. However, the Orthodox tradition associates prayer with action, thought with deed. In eastern spirituality the word is always destined to be incarnated. Thus, Mary of Nazareth, in those moments preceding the miracle, was not sleeping, but ‘active in prayer’, so that the dramatic episode of the Annunciation with the certainty and consequence of this ‘action’ which expects the normal response from the Creator. It was only Mary, by her active prayer who had the ‘keys of the Kingdom’, and was worthy, she was prepared to receive the mystery. In the contents of the Prayer Book, there is a prayer we usually gloss over and whose destination seems to be vexing: *The Prayer for the useful reading of the Holy Scriptures*. Thus, in order “for your visual thoughts to be allowed to open to the knowledge of the teachings of the gospel”, a certain prayer is required. The simple reading of the gospels is not enough. The option in itself is not enough to become diligent so that “the bright light of knowledge might shine in our hearts.”

The great discoveries of the world are the prayers of the world. In front of the piano, the easel or the white pages and why not, in front of the computer or the test tube, the artist, the theologian and the scientist transcend the visible world seeking the source of grace that inspires them, labouring and humbly adding by their work to the wonders of the world their own threefold prayer, of request, gratitude and oblation. Their prayer is not the key to the Gates of the Kingdom, but a meek knocking at the leaf of the Gates that have long been open! Just like the blind man of Jericho begging on the pathways, and being asked by Jesus what could be done for him, he answered “Lord, let me see”, the artist, the theologian and the scientist – need to clear their sight of the veil of alien beauties which broke their hearts. In the endless act of creation, since the beginning, God created man to be his interlocutor and ideal partner. Since then it has just been a long wait in which eternity is said to be the mere divine patience. At a certain moment during the Liturgy, the Priest, preparing the sacrifice utters:

“*Thine of Thy own, to Thee we bring all and for all.*” These are the words that should be placed at the top of any artistic creation.

Many Orthodox churches have the faces of the Greek philosophers: Aristotle, Filon, Plutarh, Solon, Thucydide, Platon, Apollonius, etc. painted on the outside walls. If we happen in our imagination, to come across a part of the material surface of the wall, we shall be standing in front of the unusual placement of a philosopher on the outside back to back with a saint on the inside. We are dealing with the two faces of the wall of faith in which Science faces the outside world leaning on the cult facing the altar. Mysticism and rationalism seem to be leaning on the porch of divine interval, where the sight of God is ‘a riddle’ and not ‘face to face’. *At present I partly know, but then I shall wholly know, as I also have known* – says the Apostle of Nations (I Corinthians 13.12).

The difference between *limit and mystery* mentioned at the beginning of this paper, resides in the way in which we relate Creation to Christ, but also in the enthusiasm with which we are or not disposed to place the icon of the Incarnation next to Mendeleev’s table. When the exterior powers agree with the interior powers we shall find the right judgement – the great absence of our days. When will that happen? I cannot answer this question except with the Saviour’s words in mind. “*When we have faith the size of a mustard seed.*” Until then be we theologian or scientist, let us meditate on the following incident from the Pateric, clarifying, I think, the meaning of Father Paisie Olaru’s advice – which I have put at the head of this paper, but also the healthy relation between Science and faith:

*Avva Avraam related about a sketiot, a copyist who never ate bread, that once a fellow-monk came and asked him to copy the Bible. The old man deep in contemplation, skipped several lines and did not put any punctuation marks. The fellow-monk wanted to add them himself the sentences missing and said to the old man: Avva, lines are missing. The old man replied: go, first do what is written and then come that I may write the rest for you.*

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