
NEGATION AND KNOWLEDGE
APOPHATISM AS A PREMISE OF THE MYSTICAL
EXPERIENCE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE
VEDANTIC NON-DUALISM AND
ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

Ioan Dura* and Bogdan-Florin Chirilută

Ovidius University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Aleea Universității nr. 1, Corp A, Constanța, Romania

(Received 1 April 2015)

Abstract

A simple analysis of the sacred texts of Hinduism and of Christianity highlights the fact that the Ultimate Reality/God is presented under the note of a radical transcendence, impossible to conceptualize in a notional vocabulary. Out of the need to approximate the Ultimate Reality, since man, regardless of his religious culture, has always been within the dynamics of the knowledge of this Absolute - irrespective of whether he sees it as impersonal or personal - the interpreters of the 'Upanishads' and the Christian Holy Fathers have conceived a special grammar with reference to the Transcendent Reality: *via negativa*. Negation is the basic element connecting the philosophy of the vedantic non-dualism - *Advaita*, systematized by Śāṅkara (788-820) and the Christian theology of the East. Certainly, some mentions are necessary here: we do not aim to make a comparative analysis in order to evaluate one tradition through the prism of the other. What interests us is to highlight the common manner of referring to the Ultimate Reality through the use of negation in the vocabulary regarding the knowledge of the Absolute in two different philosophical-religious cultures, two religious paradigms that see man, the universe and the Ultimate Reality differently, though they developed, identically, one, an apophatic knowledge of Brahman, and the other, an apophatic knowledge of God.

Keywords: knowledge, theology, Brahman, nirguṇa, avidyā

1. Introduction

Today's society invites us to an intercultural correspondence, and implicitly to a religious one, correspondence possible insofar two religious alterities with own identity. If the West is now experiencing, by secularization, a metamorphosis in the profile of religion in society, requiring a pseudo-religious

* E-mail: duraioan@yahoo.com

paradigm which discards to the traditional and dogmatic values, eastern Theology and Indian philosophy, more precisely vedantic non-dualism, are deeply rooted in the fact of *experience*. Basically, secularization suggests a crisis in understanding the Ultimate Reality in its transcendence. A God over which is impossible to apply an empirical and scientific knowledge has no relevance for contemporary man, who lives in logic of *here* and *now*. From these reasons, we need today, more than ever, an evaluation of apophatic discourse about Ultimate Reality, of *via negativa*, as rational and experiential exercise of asserting the transcendence.

2. The gnoseological function of negation in Advaita Vedānta

Bernard Barzel highlights that the apophatic *theology* of Śaṅkara has, as its essential element, *via negativa* [1]. A very interesting incursion in the chronology of the negation method *neti, neti* (neither so, nor so) is realized by D. B. Gangolli [2]. Considering his predecessors interested in this negative way of describing the *Ultimate Reality* in the *Upanishads*, the vedantic researcher tries to demonstrate the fact that the formulation *neti, neti* is adopted by the Upanishadic authors due to the awareness of the total impossibility of expressing using affirmative expressions what *Brahman/Ātman* is in itself. In this sense, D. B. Gangoli disapproves of P. Deussen's opinion, according to which *Brahman* is described as *neti, neti*, because it is beyond time, space and causality - therefore what is considered is the absolute transcendence of the *Ultimate Reality* in relation to the universe of phenomena - being however convinced that "during those ancient times, when the *Vedas* were drafted, it was impossible to formulate the idea of the aspatial, atemporal and non-causal existence in its abstract simplicity" [2, p. xxxi]. Regarding the negation *neti, neti*, Lakshmi Saxena wonders what the basic significance of the description *neti, neti* may be: does it refer to an absolutely transcendent principle lying in a certain region beyond the world of phenomena and able to be actualized only in a certain esoteric form of self-realization? Or does it signify the personal *Supreme*, at the heart of all the auspicious, conceived qualities, the negation involving only a negation of the non-auspicious qualities or *heya-guṇa*? Or does it mean a negation of the cosmic plurality, the world of *names-and-shapes* fictively superposed over the purely undifferentiated *Real*? Only this last variant is accepted [3].

In the same context, S. Radhakrishnan confirmed the fact that negative definitions are meant to emphasize the inadequate character of the positive attributes, as applied to the supreme *Reality*. In the *Upanishads*, it is stated that it is impossible to offer any positive determinations of the supreme Brahman. The famous passage *neti, neti* suggests that Brahman is absolutely non-empirical. It is beyond the domain of empirical thinking. It is non-intelligible through logical knowledge. It is the inner nature regarding which no conceptual interpretation is possible. It is indivisible, inalienable. It is neither external, nor conditioned by external causality. To define it, one has to transpose it into an object. We cannot even say that it is one. It is non-dual [4]. S. Dasgupta was closer to the truth

when he confirmed that the adequate way of indicating *Brahman* is by *neti, neti*, because one cannot describe it by any positive context, which is always limited by conceptual thinking. Starting from this criterion of the negation *neti, neti* as mark of the incapacity of language to comprise in words, concepts or definitions the *Ultimate Reality*, A.J. Alston concludes that Śaṅkara elaborated a ‘negative theology’ in many concerns similar to the negative theology of many Christian mystics [5]. Yet, however, S. Dasgupta repeated the opinion of P. Deussen when he stated that *Ātman* is independent from all the limitations of space, time and cause that coordinate all that is presented objectively and consequently the empirical universe [6]. At the same time, he considered that the vedantic wise men had only a vague and dreamy vision about *Brahman*: “The minds of Vedic poets so long accustomed to worship deities of visible manifestation could not easily dispense with the idea of seeking after a positive and definite content of *Brahman*. They tried some of the sublime powers of nature and also many symbols, but these could not render ultimate satisfaction. They did not know what the *Brahman* was like, for they had only a dim and dreamy vision of it in the deep craving of their souls which could not be translated into permanent terms.” [6, p. 44]

Along the line of these remarks, D.B. Gangolli states that neither the capacity of formulating the idea about *Brahman*, nor the ‘vague and dreamy’ vision of the Vedic wise men (*Rṣi*), nor the inadequacy of the positive attributes was responsible for the adoption of the so-called *negative method* in the *Upanishads*, but the intrinsic and essential nature (*svarūpa*) of *Brahman* as *Light* luminous-in-itself of the *witness conscience* (*sākṣi chaitanya*) in us all. *Brahman* as *witness conscience* or *Ātman* of all the beings, uniformly, *one-without-a-second*, eternal and unchangeable, can never be objectively represented in any way, being the invisible seer, inaudible hearer, unthought-of thinker, unknown knower, since there is no other hearer, thinker or knower than this *One-Brahman*: *tad vā etad akṣaram gārgy adṛṣtam draṣṭrasrutam śrotamatam mantravijñātam vijñātr | nānyad ato 'sti draṣṭr | nānyad ato 'sti śrotṛ | nānyad ato 'sti mantr | nānyad ato 'sti vijñātr* (“This is the imperishable, Gārgī, which sees but can’t be seen; which hears but can’t be heard; which thinks but can’t be thought of; which perceives but can’t be perceived. Besides this imperishable, there is no one that sees, no one that hears, no one that thinks, and no one that perceives.”) [*Brhadāranyaka-Upaniṣad* III.8.11] These Upanishadic statements impose the unique method of exclusion of all the empirical ways of teaching or knowledge regarding *Brahman* [2, p. xxxiv]. This method highlights a ‘*Brahman* revealed in itself’, by the simple elimination of the imaginary wave of the wrong thinking (*avidya*), built through the projection of limitative additions (*upadhī*) [*Bhagavad-Gītā-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* XVIII.50]. *Brahman*, as the inner, intimate *Self* needs no definition or proof to be known: “This entity (*Brahma*), devoid of any form as it is, is neither perceptible by any direct (ocular) means-of-proof, nor is it perceptible by inference etc., as there is absence of any indicatory mark about it (i.e. *Brahma*)” [*Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* II.1.6]. Actually, it is impossible for anyone ‘to define’ in words or ‘to formulate’ an idea about

Brahman, for the simple reason that it is beyond discursive thinking: *yatoa vāchoa nivartante apāpya manasā saha* [*Taittirīya-Upaniṣad* II.9]. Moreover, as it has been mentioned, *Brahman* is non-dual *light*, namely the pure *Consciousness* as intuitive experience, by means of which all human activities are carried out [*Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* IV.3.6, *Kena-Upaniṣad-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* I.6, *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad-Gaudapāda-Kārikā-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* III.36]. It is in this very area of the non-dual experience that *negation* has to be understood in Śaṅkara's thinking: far from being a simple exercise of philosophical dexterity, *via negativa* has a practical, experiential application in the knowledge of the *Ultimate Reality*, as E. Deutsch mentions: "The *via negativa* of Advaita Vedanta also safeguards the unqualified oneness of that state of being called *Brahman* and silences all argument that would seek either to demonstrate or to refute it. Human language has its source in phenomenal experience; hence, it is limited in its application to states of being that are beyond that experience; logic is grounded in the mind as it relates to the phenomenal order; hence, it is unable to affirm, without at the same time denying, what extends beyond that order. All determination is negation; to apply a predicate to something is to impose a limitation upon it; for, logically, something is being excluded from the subject. The Real is without internal difference and, in essence, is unrelated to the content of any other form of experience. The Real is thus unthinkable: thought can be brought to it only through negations of what is thinkable." [7]

The only test of *negation* resides in the fact that it functions and leads to the intuition of the *Ultimate Reality*, which is nothing else but the most intimate own *Self* (*ātman*): "... far from *neti neti* resulting in a void, it culminates in the supreme self" [8]. It is important to remind the fact that it is not the one engaged in knowing *Brahman* that denies the appearance over imposed by *avidyā*, since he is not aware of *Brahman-as-it-is-in-itself* (*Brahman Nirguṇa*) at the moment of his investigation and no quantity of critical reflection, namely intellectual reasoning, can lead him to the absolute truth (*parāmarthika*), beyond the scope of all mental reflections, as long as his mind is extroverted. Actually, this is the Upanishadic teaching that gives the seeker *guidance within or an introverted approach*. Thus, this is not about listening to an external teaching and then using a logical dialectics to eliminate the wrong conceptions. Actually, the *Upanishads* offer only a *return within*: the seeker, under the guidance of his teacher and in agreement with the implicit instructions of the *Upanishads*, gives total attention to the essential nature of his own *Self* (*ātman*). After that, by a gradual and prudent process of coordination of his own *partial intuition* and carefully checked by the instructor, the person engaged in knowing *Brahman* becomes stable in his intuition of *Brahman* after having eliminated all the superimpositions established by *avidyā*: "We have only to eliminate what is falsely ascribed to *Brahman* by *avidyā*; we have to make no more effort to acquire a knowledge of *Brahman* as He is quite self-evident. Thought thus quite self-evident easily knowable, quite near, and forming the very *Self*, *Brahman* appears - to the unenlightened, to those whose reason (*buddhi*) is carried away by the differentiated phenomena of names and forms created by *avidyā* - as

unknown, difficult, to know, very remote, as though He were a separate thing. But to those whose reason (*buddhi*) has turned away from external phenomena, who have secured the grace of the Guru and attained the serenity of the self (*manas*), there is nothing else so blissful, so well-known, so easily knowable, and quite so near as *Brahman*.” [*Bhagavad-Gītā-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* XVIII.50]

As D.B. Gangolli highlights, it is admitted that a simple *negation* cannot offer a complete knowledge of a thing, except if a false knowledge is replaced by a correct and positive one [2, p. xxxviii]. It is argued that it is not enough to know in the way: “I mistakenly considered something to be a snake”; it is necessary to complete this knowledge process by the positive knowledge of what the thing perceived really is in its true nature. A note of precaution is necessary in this respect. False knowledge is not non-knowledge, since it occurs. No false knowledge is non-knowledge, since, like the horns of a rabbit, it occurs. It is neither the knowledge of a non-entity. Therefore, we need to avoid mistakenly taking *negation for falsity* [9]. Consequently, it is to be noted that positive declarations in the definition of *Brahman* are much stronger than negative ones. Yet, this argument ignores the fact that *Brahman*, as our own Self, is not in the need of illumination regarding its *existence* or its essential nature. Moreover, as Śaṅkara observes, “the only function of knowledge” (*vidya*) is to eliminate the ignorance (*avidya*) shrouding the true nature of a thing: *na hi kvacitsākṣādvastudharmasyāpoḍhrī dṛṣṭā kartrī vā brahmavidyā | avidyāyāstu sarvatraiva nivartikā dṛśyate | tattheāpyabrahmatvamasarvatvaṃ cāvidyākṛtameva nivartyatāṃ brahmavidyayā | na tu pāramāthikāṃ vastu kartuṃ nivartayituṃ vārhati brahmavidyā* (“This knowledge has never been observed either directly to remove some characteristic of a thing or to create one. But everywhere it is seen to remove ignorance. Similarly here also let the idea of not being Brahman and not being all that is due to ignorance, be removed by the knowledge of Brahman, but it can neither create nor put a stop to a real entity.”) [*Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* I.4.10] Actually, we are available to know a thing more and more, proportionally to the elimination of our ignorance about it.

3. Significances of the *neti, neti* apophatism in Śaṅkara’s thinking

We could delineate the following ideas regarding the *neti, neti* apophatism, by *apophatism* understanding that recognition of the impossibility of knowing the *Absolute* in a positive way, from where the use of negations denying all that is not the *Absolute*.

3.1. *Neti, neti* - as the denial through ignorance of all empirical properties established in Brahman (*avidya*)

Negations are used in order to cancel the false indications of *avidya*, which obstructs the essential nature of *Brahman* [10]. After all limiting additions of the two forms - coarse and subtle have been eliminated, what remains is pure

Brahman, the “the Real of the Real” [*Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* II.3.6]. The negation of all distinctions made by *avidya* virtually means the denial of the entire phenomenal world superimposed on *Brahman*. In the knowledge of *Brahman*, one must deny the world, with all its luxuriant complexity of *names-and-forms* (*namārūpa*). In other words, *Brahman* is the negation of the world [11].

3.2. *Neti, neti - specifies the boundaries between the entirety of the transient phenomenal and Brahman as Real*

Brahman is opposed to all empirical existences [12], and *neti, neti* suggests the absolute transcendent nature of *Brahman* [13], its otherness, meaning that there is nothing to be compared with *Brahman*: the ultimate reality of the Upanishads is *advaitam* (non-dual). In this context *neti, neti* is the premise of the discrimination (*viveka*) between *Real* and *non-real*, between what is true and what is false or illusory. The negative method of teaching *Brahman* excludes it from everything that it is not. All that can be explicitly determined and denoted by positive attributes falls within the empirical of the plurality and therefore it is not the non-dual transcendent *Brahman*. In another line of thought, everything that can be characterized as ‘this’ or ‘that’ is finally abandoned as being unreal, since *Brahman* cannot be singularized. Positive determinations such as name, form, qualities, etc. are limitations and should therefore be denied for expressing *Brahman*.

3.3. *Neti, neti - as a means of knowledge of Brahman as-how-it is-in-itself, free of all names and forms, knowledge which eventually dissolves in the non-dual experience*

The best way to get to know the nature of *Brahman* is to submitting to a “negative metaphysics” [14]. The real basis for denial *Brahman* of its *upādhi* is the transcendental experience of the ultimate unity of Reality. Thus it becomes clear that the advaitic apophatism is directly related to the thesis of superimposition (*adhyāsa*): it denies what is superimposed by ignorance over the pure non-dual nature of *Brahman* [15].

When disclaiming all positive determinations that transmute the ultimate reality into an object of knowledge, what remains is the pure inner nature of the Self (*Atman*) [*Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad* & *Gaudāpaḍa-Kārikā-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* III.26]. The Self is the indisputable *datum* of all experiences: “The Self being the substratum or basis for the employment of the means-of-proof, its existence is supposed to be fully established, prior to such employment of the means-of-proof. Repudiation of such an one, is not possible. It is adventitious entity that can be repudiated, and never one’s own nature, because he who would seek to be such a repudiator, would, being the Self (*ātma*) himself, be the Self’s own nature.” [*Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* II.3.7] “[...] It should be understood that only the two phenomenal aspects of *Brahma* are here denied, and *Brahma*

itself is left over (undenied)” [*Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* III.2.22]. „The meaning [of the negation *neti, neti*] is, that there is nothing besides this Brahma and hence it is described as ‘not so, not so’, and it does not mean that Brahma itself is non-existent, and this same is indicated to be the transcendent Brahma, which is not denied. [...] The denial stops short of Brahma (i.e. it does not repudiate it), and does not culminate into a mere void or Nihility (*Shūnya*). Therefore we conclude that the denial stops short of Brahma and does not (by repudiating Brahma) culminate in a mere void or Nihility.” [*Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* III.2.22] The non-dual *Brahman* is “the farthest limit of the negation of duality, called up by ignorance, and this Brahma supports (the duality) like a tail” [*Taittirīya-Upaniṣad-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* II.V.1].

3.4. *Neti, neti* - is, on the one hand, the inability of the human mind to conceive the transcendental essence of the Ultimate Reality

At R.T. Blackwood we find an interesting interpretation of *neti, neti*. He interprets *neti, neti* in the context of mystical experience: „*Neti, neti* – nothing can be stated at all. Only in this way can the complete ineffability of mysticism be preserved.” [16] On the other hand, *neti, neti* it is the expression of “full unknowableness” of *Brahman* [17].

3.5. *Neti, neti* - the only way to communicate the non-dual, unknowable, ineffable and non-relational nature of Brahman

Brahman can be denoted only by negations [18]. In *Brahman* all distinctions and relations are obliterated and outdated and *via negativa* guarantees the unqualified unity of *Brahman*. *Brahman*, when compared with anything else, is best understood in the description *neti, neti* as being neither this nor that, being negatively described as “the other of its own otherness” [19]. The negative description is conceptually the most appropriate of all. In his commentary on *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Śaṅkara states that “[...] being inaccessible to speech, Brahma, the Knowable, is defined in all Upanishads only by a denial of all specialities, - ‘Not thus’ (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 2.3.6) and ‘not gross, not subtle’ (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 3.8.8) - in the terms ‘It is not this”” [*Bhagavad-Gītā-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* XIII.12].

3.6. *Neti, neti* - as the positive dimension of negation

Neti, neti is not a total negation, but rather is a negation that also says something positive in the sense that *Brahman* is the existence *par excellence*. *Neti, neti* “negatives not absolutely everything, but only everything but *Brahma*” [*Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-Bhāṣya* III.2.22]. The expression *neti, neti*, used quite frequently in the Upanishads and to which Śaṅkara is frequently making reference throughout his comments, is not a denial of *Brahman* as an entity. Since Brahma cannot be known or characterized by the finite categories of the

object, when *Brahman/Atman* is implied as *nirguṇa* or *neti, neti*, it is not envisaged as void. The constant emphasis of the *neti, neti* negation has a secondary purpose. First, *Brahman* is understood by means of a positive statement, such as *Tat tvam asi* [*Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* VI.8.7], which represents the ultimate Reality (*atman*) in us. Thus, the *neti, neti* negation should be understood in junction with the positive statement *Tat tvam asi*: „Negation is only a preliminary to affirmation. It means that the Absolute is not conceived here objectively as merely inferred from outer phenomena; but as revealing itself within us. This alters totally the significance of the negative description, for we are thereby constrained to admit not only its positive character but also its spiritual nature.” [20] Moreover, any objectivity of *Brahman* is only an inference from the external phenomena and therefore is not sustainable. In this respect, we should see both the negative and the positive aspects together, which reveal the *Brahman* as indeterminate. As it is expressed in negative terms, *Brahman* is all-comprehensive, asserted as something that is beyond negation and affirmation [21].

4. The apophatism in the Orthodox theology - the experiential dimension of knowledge

Along these clarifications, we might not be wrong stating that Śāṅkara is probably the vedāntic thinker coming closest to the Christian apophatic theology, regarding the negation method. Just like *Brahman nirguṇa*, God in His quality of Being is incomprehensible and impossible to circumscribe for man's thinking. In Christian theology, apophatism has to do with knowledge, with a progress of knowledge from affirmation to negation, from rational deduction to experience, as is stated by Dionysius the Areopagite: “Besides, we need to try to find out how we could get to know God, Who is neither intelligible, nor sensible and not at all a being among all the other beings. It is truer to say not that we know God according to His nature, which is completely unknown, beyond all understanding and thinking, but that we, following the given of all beings, like a being that was created by Him from eternity and depicts somewhat likenesses and images of His divine models, we go up and orderly, according to the measure of our powers, towards what is above all things, to reach negation and to go beyond everything and to get to the cause of everything.” [*De divine nominibus*, VII.3, P.G. 3, 869CD-872A]

The apophatic (negative) knowledge of God does not exclude His cataphatic (positive) knowledge, but details it. When we call God Goodness, Good, Life, Almighty, Omnipresent, we refer to His works or manifestations in the world, to the uncreated energies by which God descends to us, and not to His divine being, which is completely unknowable, as Saint Basil the Great asserted [*Adversus Eunomium*, I.6, P.G. 29, 521C]. By these uncreated energies, God communicates Himself, while He remains incommunicable in His being and makes Himself known while remaining unknown in His being. The uncreated energies differ from the divine Being, yet they are not separated from the divine

Being, God being present as a Person in them, without being mistakenly taken for them. In this sense, Saint Gregory Palama teaches: “The divine nature has to be called at the same time incommunicable and, in a certain sense, communicable; we acquire participation to God’s nature and yet He remains totally inaccessible” [Saint Gregory Palama, *Theophanes*, P.G. 150, col. 932D].

On the one hand, God is given innumerable names, on the other hand, God is the unnamed, the One to Whom, according to His Being, no name is a good match. Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes that the divine nature has no name that could express it. All the names are of the works. Even divinity (*θεοτης*) is the name of a work (*θεειν* – to see). The nature of God is beyond words. The nature of God is beyond the work expressed by the word divinity, as the subject of the work compared to the work itself [22]. When we refer to God’s manifestations, we make positive statements about Him, yet when we have in view His being, we deny all these affirmations. V. Lossky, making a clearer presentation of the Orthodox apophatism, highlights that “we cannot conceive God in Himself, in His essence, in His mystery. Trying to conceive God in Himself means being reduced to silence, because neither the thoughts, nor the words can comprehend the infinite in those concepts which, by defining, set limits. For these reasons, the Church Fathers have used the negative way. The apophatic way is an attempt to know God not in what He is, but in what He is not.” [23] Apophatism consists in denying what God is not, without denying God as a superior Personal Entity.

It is impossible to know God according to His essence or nature, because we cannot subordinate the divine uncreated essence to the nature of the semantics of the word and to the meaning of the notion [24]. In this sense, we need to understand the affirmation of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: “expressing God is impossible, yet understanding Him is even more impossible” [*Oratio XXVIII (Theologica II)*, IV, P.G. 36, col. 29C-32A]. The divine Being cannot be conceived rationally and expressed verbally, being the *reality* above the beings, the reality “that we can neither conceive, nor express, nor contemplate somehow, since He is above everything and completely unknowable” [*De divine nominibus*, I.4, P.G. 3, 592 D].

Saint John of Damascus, as one who synthesized the patristic thinking, underlines the incognoscibility of the divine Being: “The Divinity is infinite and impossible to grasp with the mind and the only thing that we can understand is God’s infinity and incomprehensibility. All that we say in positive terms about God do not indicate the nature, but what can be found in relation to His nature. God is nothing like the beings, and this is not because He is not a Being, but because He is above all the beings, above being. Truly, to be and to be known are of the same order. What is beyond all knowledge is also in an absolute way beyond all being; and inversely, what is above the being is also above knowledge.” [*Expositio Fidei Orthodoxae*, I.5, P.G. 94, col. 800AD]

On the one hand, in the Christian theology, the apophatic does not mean a total closure of God in Himself, in His own sufficiency, since God, “the Being that no one can name, is calling Himself ‘I Am Who I Am’ (Exodus 3.14)” [23,

p. 25]. On the other hand, one cannot reduce apophatism to the level of negative-rational knowledge, to a simple negation of some rational affirmations about God. Dumitru Stăniloae established three levels, in an ascending direction, of apophatism: (1) intellectual negative theology; (2) the moment when we leave any consideration of the concepts taken from nature and any preoccupation of even denying them, therefore when we go over negation, as intellectual operation as well, and over a certain apophatic feeling of them, we enter a state of silence produced by prayer; it is a feeling in the dark of the energies, that has gone beyond the negative intellectual theology and the apophatic feeling accompanying it; (3) the vision of the divine light [25].

God is beyond affirmations and negations, these being the operation of reason in a conceptual process: “There is no affirmation about God [...] because God is above any perfect affirmation the unitary cause of all things and beyond any negation the superiority of the One completely separate from everything and above everything” [*De mystica theologia*, V, P.G. 3, 1048 AB]. “To God, we need to acknowledge all the affirmations borrowed from things, as One Who is the cause of them all, and we also need to deny to Him, more appropriately, everything, as He is above everything, yet we should not consider that the negations deny the affirmations, but we should rather consider that He Who is above all negation and affirmation is also above all negations” [*De mystica theologia*, I.2, P.G. 3, col. 1000B]. God being undeterminable both for affirmations and for negations, we can know Him by *nonknowledge* (*αγνωσία*). By *nonknowledge* we get to know the One Who is above all the objects of knowledge possible. God no longer appears as an object, since the problem is no longer knowledge but *union* (*ενωσις*) [26]. It is precisely this that is the distinctive note of the apophatic attitude in the Orthodox theology, in which the accent falls not on intellectual contemplation, but on what is called *union*: “The apophatic theology can be understood and expressed; the union is, however, ineffable and not understood even by those who experience it” [22, p. 58].

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we are now in a better position to affirm that the advaitic philosophy and the Orthodox theology meet in the negative manner of constructing a discourse on the respectively the Ultimate Reality and God. The negation *neti, neti* (‘neither so, nor so’ or ‘neither this, nor this’) does not represent for Śaṅkara a discourse about *Brahman nirguṇa*, as one could understand, when seen from a Christian perspective. *Brahman nirguṇa* is beyond the conceptual sphere, be it positive (*sat, jñānam, anantam*) or negative (*nirviśeṣa, niṣkriya, nirvikāra, niravayava, arūpa*), because language, thinking and knowledge expressed conceptually have to do exclusively with the empirical sphere. *Brahman* cannot be measured and no concept circumscribes it. Circumscribing it in a definition, even a negative one, would mean delimiting it. This incapacity of the concept, of the word and of thinking to *define Brahman*

nirguṇa suggest the premises of an apophatism based on which *Brahman* remains an inexpressible, mystically experienced mystery.

The apophatic Orthodox knowledge is knowledge by experience, knowledge in the sense of *union*. In the experimental apophatic knowledge, on the one hand, God is perceived [in Christ], on the other hand, what is perceived lets one understand that what is being perceived is beyond all one can perceive: “By what is perceived, He attracts me to Him (for a totally unperceivable Being would give no hope and no help); while by what is not perceived He stirs my admiration; and, being admired, He is wanted again; and being wanted, He purifies us; and purifying us, He gives us a divine likeness; and making us become so [in His likeness], He speaks to us as with His friends; moreover, the word dares to say an even bolder thing: God gets united to gods and is known by them, namely as much as He knows those who know Him” [*Oratio XXXVIII*, P.G. 36, col. 317CD].

References

- [1] B. Barzel, *Mystique de L'Ineffable dans l'hindouisme et le christianisme. Çankara et Eckhart*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1982, 85-111.
- [2] D.B. Gangolli, *The Perfect & Unique Method of Shankara's Non-dualism*, Hind Navotthana Pratishtan, Kerala, 2001, xxxi-xli.
- [3] L. Saxena, *Neo-Hegelian and Neo-Advaitic Monism. A Study in Converging Perspectives*, Bharat Bharati Bhandar, Delhi, 1980, 98.
- [4] S. Radhakrishnan, *History of Philosophy. Eastern and Western*, Vol. I, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1957, 275.
- [5] A.J. Alston, *Samkara in East and West Today*, in *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta. Essays in Commemoration of Prof. Richard De Smet*, S.J. Bradley & J. Malkovsky (eds.), Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2000, 108.
- [6] S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1957, 45.
- [7] E. Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1969, 11.
- [8] J.G. Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. A way of teaching*, Routledge Curzon, London, 2005, 144.
- [9] K.H. Potter, *Presuppositions of Indian's Philosophies*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1999, 220.
- [10] R.H. Jones, *Mysticism Examined. Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, 61.
- [11] R. Karunakaran, *The Concept of Sat in Advaita Vedānta*, Sri Śaṅkara Sanskrit Vidyapeetham Edakkadam, Quilon, 1980, 157.
- [12] B. Correya, *Heidegger and Śaṅkara. A Comparative Study of 'Thinking of Being' and 'Advaita'*, Jyotir Dharma Publication, Kerala, 2003, 182.
- [13] J. Grimes, *An Advaita Vedānta Perspective on Language*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1991, 72.
- [14] J. Payyappilly, *The Concept of Man in the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. An Inquiry into Theological Perspectives*, Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt, 2005, 99.

- [15] L. Gardet and O. Lacombe, *L'expérience du Soi. Étude de mystique comparée*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1981, 109.
- [16] R.T. Blackwood, *Philos. East West*, **13** (1963) 204.
- [17] P. Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta. According to Bādarāyaṇa's Brahma-Sūtras and Çaṅkara's Commentary thereon set forth as a Compendium of the Dogmatics of Brahmanism from the Standpoint of Çaṅkara*, English translation, Dover Publications, New York, 1973, 211.
- [18] S. Satprakāshānanda, *Methods of Knowledge. Perceptual, Non-perceptual, and Transcendental. According to Advaita Vedānta*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1965, 251.
- [19] S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1951, 537.
- [20] M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, M/S Kavyalaya Publishers, Delhi, 1994, 375-376.
- [21] P.K. Mohan, *Śaṅkara's Concept of God*, Nelanutala Publishers, Nellore, 1978, 66-67.
- [22] D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Scripta, București, 1993, 73.
- [23] V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, Romanian translation, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1993, 37.
- [24] C. Yannaras, *Heidegger și Areopagitul*, Romanian translation, Anastasia, București, 1996, 68.
- [25] D. Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, 269.
- [26] V. Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Romanian translation, Bonifaciu, București, 1998, 25.