



## A Positive Side to Apophaticism: Prolegomena

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**Abstract:** The article synthetically presents positive aspects of apophaticism. It discusses its apologetic role, its importance in defending against magical thinking, its focus on experience, its openness to pluralism, and its inspirational role for a variety of disciplines in delimiting their cognitive boundaries. Some of the most important conclusions are: a) apophaticism played an important role in the early days of Christianity in polemics against both pagan cults and magical tendencies; b) already in ancient Greece apophaticism influenced the search not only for symbolic interpretations of Homer's poems but also for religious experience; c) the limits of cognition discovered by theology are becoming a contemporary experience of other sciences (mathematics, physics).

**Keywords:** apophaticism, apology, religious experience, magic, pluralism, limitative theorems

Apophaticism in this article is understood, as proposed by Waclaw Hryniewicz, not only as a language used to speak about God, but more than that – as a dimension and method of theological thinking.<sup>1</sup> The first examples of apophaticism conceptualized in this way are found as early as ancient Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is where one should look for the genesis of apophaticism found in the Old Testament. While in the Greek language, it is most common to associate the origins of this type of thinking with Plato or Pythagoreanism, some elements of apophaticism are present as early as Homer's poems. In the pages of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the gods are most often (more than 160 times) referred to by the negative term “immortals” (ἀθάνατοι), as opposed to humans who are called “mortals” (θνητοί).<sup>3</sup> When terminology indicating man's resemblance to a god appears, it foreshadows the death of man, something alien to the Homeric gods.<sup>4</sup> Thus, one who is similar to the gods is one who is absolutely unlike them. From the beginning, Homeric anthropomorphism went hand in hand

<sup>1</sup> Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutika w dialogu*, 51.

<sup>2</sup> A text by an anonymous Egyptian poet in English translation: “He is not seen; He hath neither minister nor offerings; He is not worshipped in temples; His dwelling is not known. No shrine of His hath painted images. There is no habitation which may hold Him. Unknown is His name in heaven, and His form is not manifested, for every image of Him is in vain. His home is in the universe, not in any dwelling made by human hands.” (Jugrin, “Negative Theology,” 151).

<sup>3</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods*, 65; Heath, *The Bible, Homer*, 76, 217.

<sup>4</sup> Heath, *The Bible, Homer*, 22.

with apophatic thinking. Examples of a similar perspective can be found in Greek drama. Aeschylus, in his tragedy *Agamemnon* (vv. 160–162), treats Zeus as an inefable grandeur. “He is a god for whom it is difficult to find a name and whose essence is difficult to put into words.”<sup>5</sup>

Even if Greek philosophers produced theoretical justifications for apophaticism, it had already been present in epic depictions and drama several centuries earlier. Werner Jaeger emphasized that the very ideas that are found in philosophical treatises often have already existed before in poetry: “What Homer’s epic has in common with Greek philosophy is the fact that they both present the structure of reality in its entirety, though philosophy present in the rational form where the epos shows it in mythical form.”<sup>6</sup>

Jewish literature, too, is imbued with apophatic thinking, as can be seen, both in the Old Testament and in the works of such philosophers as Philo of Alexandria, writing in Greek, who treats biblical anthropomorphic images of God as “useful lies of Moses.”<sup>7</sup>

The nascent Christianity drew inspiration from the cultural achievements of the time. Hence, it is not surprising that apophaticism has established itself in Christian theology from its very beginnings.

It might seem surprising if one speaks of a positive side to apophaticism. This is because the Greek term ἀπόφασις expresses the idea of negation and contradiction. It would seem that a positive thing is to assert, to define, rather than to negate, undermine or contradict. And yet the history of theological thought proves that apophatic thinking opened theology to original approaches and gave impetus to new explorations. This article aims to show the positive role that apophaticism played in the past and continues to play today.

Publications that discuss the subject of apophaticism have either an introductory character<sup>8</sup> or demonstrate the development of apophatic ideas in history,<sup>9</sup> or they present an author or some narrow issue in detail.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to find a synthetic account that would panoramically present the role that apophaticism played and continues to play. The present publication seeks to address this gap.

It is not the purpose of this article to cite all statements on the role of apophaticism, but rather to provide a panorama based on selected texts, giving insight into the most important functions of apophatic thinking has performed and continues to perform. Due to the nature of this paper, the method of synthesis was used, selecting

<sup>5</sup> Chodkowski, *Ajschylos*, 372–380.

<sup>6</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, 429.

<sup>7</sup> Mrugalski, “Bóg niezdolny do gniewu,” 282–290.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., Mortley, *From Word to Silence*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g., Brugarolas, “La «conspiración» de los contrarios.”

from the entire theological and philosophical tradition examples representative of the issues addressed.

This article is structured according to five functions of apophatic thinking: its apologetic role, its anti-magical role, that of orientation to religious experience, that of opening to pluralism, and that of inspiring various disciplines of knowledge to define their cognitive boundaries.

## 1. Apology

Both in the books of the New Testament and the works of early Christian writers, there is a wealth of examples of apophatic thinking. God, whom no one has ever seen (John 1:18) and who dwells in inaccessible light (1 Tim 6:16), is known only to the Son, who can reveal Him (John 1:18). It is only through revelation that God becomes knowable to some extent.

Early Christian apologists emphasized the absolute otherness of God in comparison to creation. The foundation for this way of thinking was laid by Justin Martyr.<sup>11</sup> In one of the earliest Christian texts addressing this issue, the author of *Apology* wrote:

We do not worship with many sacrifices and floral offerings the things men have made (μορφώσαντες), set in temples, and called gods. We know that they are inanimate and lifeless and have not the form (μορφήν) of God (for we do not think that God has that form (μορφήν) which some say they reproduce in order to give honor to Him) – but have the names (ὀνόματα) and shapes (σχήματα) of those evil demons who have appeared [to men]. Why should we tell you, who already know, into what different shapes the workmen fashion their material, by carving, cutting, molding, and hammering? From vessels destined for vile purposes, by merely changing their shape and by skillfully giving them a new form (μορφωποιήσαντες), they often make what they call (ἐπονομάζουσιν) gods. Thus, His name is applied (ἐπονομάζεται) to corruptible things that need constant care. This, we think, is not only stupid (ἄλογον) but also disrespectful (ὑβρει) to God, who is of ineffable (ἄρρητον) glory and form (μορφήν).<sup>12</sup>

According to Justin, things made by humans do not have the shape of the true God. He calls attempts to make images of Him and refer to them as “God” an unintelligent (ἄλογον) action and considers it a manifestation of pride that insults the true God. Here he uses the term ὑβρις, which the Greeks used to describe the greatest sin

<sup>11</sup> Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Iustinus Martyr, *1 Apol.* 9.

when man forgot who he was and tried to usurp what was beyond his reach. Such arrogance breeds blindness and leads to disaster.<sup>13</sup> The author of *Apology* believes that such ὑβρις manifests itself in the attempts to describe the Divine glory and shape in human words.

There are three ways in which Justin opposes any action that would seek to express in words the truth about God. Not only does he consider such action irrational (ἄλογον), but also impossible (ἄρρητον) and unlawful (ὑβρις).

In his view, even the terms commonly used in relation to God: “Father,” “God,” “Creator,” “Lord,” “Ruler,” are not names (ὀνόματα) of God. They describe His works and not His nature. Justin believes that only someone older than God could give Him a name. And since God is uncreated, this is impossible. The name “God” is only a human representation of a reality that cannot be described. It has a mysterious meaning, impossible to know (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν).<sup>14</sup>

The thought of the author of *Apology*, emphasizing both the uncreatedness of God – which differentiates Him from everything that exists in the world – and the inadequacy of human language to describe the reality of the Divine, would be creatively continued by later authors (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen),<sup>15</sup> emphasizing that the universe was created *ex nihilo*.<sup>16</sup> This idea would permanently enter Christian theological thought.

One of the main purposes behind emphasizing the differences between God and the world and stressing that the world was not created from some primordial matter, but from nothing, was the apologia of the one true God. The consequence of these theses was to undermine attempts to deify any created thing. No created thing can be God. Thus apophatic thought performed an apologetic function. The development of negative theology, emphasizing the successive differences between God and the created world, made it possible to criticize both pagan cults, based on Greek or Roman mythology, and some philosophical orientations that suggested partial knowability of God. Thus, the worship of humans, animals, plants, the earth, and any works made with human hands, etc., was the worship of idols, not of the true God.<sup>17</sup> Apophatic theology proved to be an important weapon against both idolatry and certain philosophical orientations, such as the pagan middle Platonists.<sup>18</sup>

Apophatic thinking played a significant role not only in the polemic against the deification of the created world but also against heresies that emerged from Christianity. A variety of Gnostic factions have endeavored to explain all issues related to the nature of God, His origin, and action. Although the founders of Gnostic

<sup>13</sup> Chodkowski, *Ajschylos*, 383.

<sup>14</sup> Iustinus Martyr, *2 Apol.* 6.

<sup>15</sup> Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 11–15.

<sup>17</sup> Turner, “Apophaticism,” 24–25.

<sup>18</sup> Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 46. Origen argued with Celsus who was a middle Platonist.

heresies referred to apophatic terminology, they invoked the knowledge of God who revealed everything to them.<sup>19</sup>

Their views are referred to by the author of the largest patristic catalog of heresies, Epiphanius of Salamis. In his work *Panarion* he refers to apophaticism as an important tool in the fight against the Gnostics. For example, he is critical of the Marcosians who attempted to describe both the Father and the Divine Logos using figures, numbers and structural elements.<sup>20</sup>

Epiphanius wrote:

And your reduction of the Lord of all, who established the heavens, to 888, like the alphabet; your subdivision even of the Father himself, who contains all things and yet is uncontained (ἀχώρητον), into a tetrad, an ogdoad, a decad and a dodecad; and your explanation of the ineffability and inconceivability (τὸ ἄρρητον καὶ ἀεννόητον), as you say, of the Father by multiplications like these? You make the essence and subsistence of the One you call incorporeal (ἄσώματον) and without essence (ἀνούσιον) out of many letters, with new letters generated by others, though you yourself were the false Daedalus and the bad sculptor of the power before the all-highest! And by subdividing the essence you say is indivisible (ἀμέριστον) into mutes, vowels and voiced consonants, and falsely attributing their voicelessness to the Father of all and his Ennoia, you have thrust all who trust you into the very height of blasphemy and the greatest impiety.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in the case of Marcosians, apophaticism is more of a declarative nature rather than actual one. Hand in hand with the wealth of negative terminology they used there went the explication of all divine mysteries. Epiphanius points out to Marcosians the contradiction between their declarations and reality, criticizing their attempts to explain what is inaccessible to the human mind. He accuses the Marcosians of blasphemy and impiety.

Apophatic thinking played an important role in polemics against heresies that questioned the eternal begetting of the Son of God. In the case of the Eunomians, there are claims to a precise description of the Divine essence and therefore attempts at a rationalist approach to the Holy Trinity.<sup>22</sup> In polemic with them, Gregory of Nyssa developed the idea of God's infinity by "placing the life" of the Son within it.<sup>23</sup> The reference to God's infinity made it possible to maintain the distinction between the Father and the Son and their unity at the same time. Within the framework of infinity, there can be no discussion about what is greater and what is smaller.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 4, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 11, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 11, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 26–27.

<sup>23</sup> Weedman, "The Polemical Context," 84.

<sup>24</sup> Weedman, "The Polemical Context," 102–104.

Apophatic categories helped to find arguments against heresies trying to take an overly rationalistic approach to the mystery of God.

Against the background of these reflections, a question that arises is: Is not the contemporary return to ancient mythologies and deification of created things the aftermath of the neglect of apologetics based on apophatic thinking?

## 2. Defense Against Magic

Justin's reflections on the inadequacy of names also served an additional role in combating magical tendencies which were a challenge faced not only by the pagan world but also by the Christian one. The fact that this was not an easy struggle is evidenced by the involvement of secular authorities and legislation to limit the influence of magic. This was already true of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Magic uses words and formulas to which it attributes extraordinary power. Numerous terms for God (Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Sabaoth) are found in Christian Magical Papyri.<sup>26</sup> One can also find there the text of the *Our Father* prayer or entire pericopes of the Gospel. Quoting Gospel passages was meant to help make an event (such as an instance of healing) happen again. Magical texts refer to the Gospel of St. Matthew as a healing text.<sup>27</sup> These positive epithets referring to God, prayers, or Gospel pericopes would typically be used for healing or warding off some evil.

In almost every papyrus, there are either epithets referring to God or references to His name. The name seems to have a causal effect and everything is accomplished by its power (διὰ τὸ ὄνομα). The Christian Papyri attribute magical power to the name (ὄνομα) of God on more than one occasion. It is described as: "great" (μέγα), "holy" (ἅγιον), "admirable" (θαυμαστόν), "full of glory" (ὑπερένδοξον), "terrible to opponents" (φοβερὸν τοῖς ὑπεναντίοις) and "unspeakable" (ἀμύθητον).<sup>28</sup>

However, the inadequacy of names to describe the nature of God, emphasized by Christian authors, undermined the theoretical foundation for formulating spells. Magic formulas did not reflect reality, which nullified their effectiveness. It is difficult to assess the impact of this type of theology of names on early Christianity. However, it is a fact that apophatic theology was a powerful voice against magic. It was undermining its foundations. Perhaps this is why authors of the Magical Papyri are

<sup>25</sup> In Rome, the oldest codifications (the Laws of the Twelve Tables) already addressed the issue of magic. As for Greece, there is much less evidence. Wypustek, *Magia antyczna*, 322–340; Collins, *Magic*, 132–165.

<sup>26</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 201–230.

<sup>27</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 211; Meyer – Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Gilski, "Chrześcijańskie papirusy magiczne," 92–93.

perceived to be uneducated people, as evidenced by the not particularly elaborate, non-literary language of the texts, often with incorrect morphology and syntax.<sup>29</sup>

Apophatic theology played a purifying role in early Christianity, helping to protect it from the taint of other cults and offered a weapon against magic.

The problem has returned with a vengeance in the era of iconoclastic disputes. The debates surrounding icons in the 8th and 9th centuries revealed that among Christians, images of God, Jesus Christ, angels, and saints were at risk of being treated magically. The debates of the Second Council of Nicea revealed some abuses concerning icons. They were treated by some Christians analogously to pagan idols. Women had representations of saints on their dresses, icons were taken as godparents, liturgy was celebrated on icons instead of altars, and even paint from icons was added to consecrated wine.<sup>30</sup> Descriptions of the miraculous effects of icons prove that the scale of these phenomena was not marginal.<sup>31</sup> Iconoclasm was an expression of extremely apophatic thinking, challenging even the incarnation. Ultimately, the trend of balanced apophaticism came to the fore during the Council. One can make paintings and worship them. Incarnation is the fundamental rationale that allows the painting of icons of Jesus Christ. The worship of an icon, however, is not the worship of either wood, mosaic or paint, but of the person who is depicted on it. The veneration given to the image passes to the prototype.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is about the worship of the person, not the worship of matter.

The fathers of the Second Council of Nicea used the achievements of Christian theology. The inadequacy of names in relation to God did not result in a ban on writing theological treatises. It only provided an important perspective, allowing one to approach with a high dose of caution any truth about God expressed in human language. *Per analogiam*, it was not forbidden to create icons, but only a perspective was provided that moved thinking about images from the realm of matter to that of interpersonal relationships.

Christianity of the first millennium was faced with two fundamental areas of magic: the magic of words and the magic of figurative representations. Apophatic thinking was the answer given to these two tendencies. The question that arises in this context is – Is it not the case that the contemporary interest in esotericism and magical practices is a symptom of insufficient emphasis on apophatic thinking? The issues related to the contribution of apophatic thinking to magical tendencies have not been discussed in any scientific analysis to date.

<sup>29</sup> Wypustek, *Magia antyczna*, 22–23.

<sup>30</sup> Łukaszuk, *Obraz święty*, 46–47; Maguire, “Magic in the Christian Image,” 51–71.

<sup>31</sup> Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Lamberz, *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, 826.

### 3. Orientation Toward Experience

The inability to describe the nature of God and the inadequacy of human concepts to describe divine reality resulted in the search for new ways to perceive God. That was the situation even long before Christianity. Gods that were invisible and indescribable by means of any human language could be experienced at the level of emotions or experience. Thus, the apophatic tendency resulted in an increasing popularity of mystery cults. The realm of feelings, human emotions, and extraordinary experience was what made it possible to personally touch the untouchable, for an instant grasp the incomprehensible. The ancient mystery cults owed their popularity to this approach.

The Classical era saw a breakthrough in the religiosity of the Greeks. It had both an intellectual and spiritual dimension. The development of philosophical thought fostered either a departure from traditional religion based on the Homeric tradition or an allegorical interpretation of Homer's poems. At the same time, the mystery cults that were gaining popularity (the Eleusinian mysteries, the Dionysian movement, and Orphism) offered closer and more intimate contact with the deity, including the complete union with the god proposed by the Orphists.<sup>33</sup> The ancient Greeks, long before the advent of Christianity, were aware of the limitations of their ability to know their deities, which is why many of them sought religious experience in mystery cults.

On many occasions, the Church Fathers expressed their belief in the primary role of experience over verbal explanation. This was particularly true of the sacraments. Such an approach reflects apophatic thinking, where the word is secondary and can even hinder religious experience.

And this is why St. Ambrose wrote:

On questions of right conduct we discoursed daily at the time when the lives of the patriarchs or the precepts of the Proverbs were being read, in order that, trained and instructed thereby, you might become accustomed to walk in the paths of our elders and to tread in their steps, and to obey the divine oracles; to the end that you might, after being renewed by baptism, continue to practise the life which befitted the regenerate. Now the season reminds us to speak about the mysteries, and to give a reasoned account (*rationem*) of the sacraments; for if we had thought that such an account should be propounded before baptism to the uninitiated, we should be esteemed traitors rather than teachers; further, because it were better that the light of the mysteries (*lux mysteriorum*) should reveal itself (*infuderit*) unasked and unexpected than preceded by some discourse (*sermo aliquis*).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Banek, *Mistycy i bezbożnicy*, 50, 173–174; Cosmopoulos, *Bronze Age Eleusis*, 17–24.

<sup>34</sup> Ambrosius, *Myst.* I, 1–2.

Not only does the Bishop of Milan emphasize the practice of the Church to prioritize religious experience before explaining certain truths and rituals, but he also regards such a method of acting as appropriate, producing better results (*melius*) than if the opposite approach was taken. He uses the word “penetrate” (*infundere*) in this context. The sacraments of Christian initiation were preceded, as Ambrose points out, by an ethical lecture based on biblical examples. However, they were not intended as an explanation of liturgical rites. Thus, the word about God (*sermo*) is not only secondary to the light (*lux*) that penetrates the person receiving the sacraments of Christian initiation but can also hinder the perception of that light. Both the explanation (*sermo*) and the search for essence (*ratio*) follow the experience of religious experience (*lux*).

Since the beginning of Christianity, the question of religious experience has held a privileged position with regard to attempts to describe the mystery of man’s encounter with God. Over time, through the Council of Chalcedon, a framework was developed for talking about how man can experience God. The negative terms that appear in it that describe the relationship between the two natures in Christ (ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀχωρίστως),<sup>35</sup> are characteristic for the relationship between divinity and humanity. Thus, they refer to how a person can experience God. The closeness of God and man never leads to blending, some form of dissolution of man in God, or a change in divine or human nature. Man does not cease to be man, and God does not cease to be God. The Chalcedonian dogma laid down a certain framework for talking about the closeness of God and man.

Apophatic theology directed human reflection to the track of religious experience. As an outcome of this trend come descriptions of the experiences of mystics: whether it be Rhineland mysticism (Meister Eckhart), or Spanish mystics (St. John of the Cross).<sup>36</sup> The point of reference for recognizing their authenticity will be the doctrine promulgated at the Council of Chalcedon to distinguish true mystical experiences from false pseudo-experiences.

Hence, apophatic theology played and continues to play an important role in the process of verifying the authenticity of mystical experiences. This raises the question: aren’t modern apostasies the result of too little emphasis on apophaticism and the associated appreciation of religious experience?

<sup>35</sup> Regarding the history and meaning of the terms, cf. Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 83–84.

<sup>36</sup> Hewitt, *Negative Theology*, 11–13. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 244–248.

#### 4. Openness to Pluralism

Negative theology and philosophy have become a strong stimulus for exploration and research since antiquity. After all, it turns out that negative language has opened up very wide fields of research. While pointing to boundaries that should not be crossed, it leaves considerable space for exploration. And this paves the way for a plurality of solutions.

At the outset, it is worth noting that some negative terms have undergone an evolution in their interpretation. This is the case, for example, of the concept of “infinity” (ἄπειρον, ἀπειρία). The term has evolved from a negative to a positive meaning.<sup>37</sup> Certain concepts, although expressed in negative language, have a positive meaning. This is the case, for example, with the concept of “not becoming mixed up with” (ἀσυγχύτως). The First Council of Constantinople, in Canon 2, forbade the bishops of one province from “becoming mixed up with” (μηδὲ συγχέειν) the affairs of other provinces. That concerned administrative matters.<sup>38</sup> By the same token, in the interpretation of the council, the term has a positive, organizing nature. Other negative terms have ambivalent meanings, depending on the context. This is the case with the term ἀδιαίρετως used by the Council of Chalcedon. The term was known from the Ephesian *Formula of Peace*. The participle διαιρῶντας, used in its positive form, referred to the role of theologians, able to distinguish, between what pertains to divine nature and what pertains to human nature.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the context delineates the semantic field of the term. As heresies attempted to introduce divisions – whether between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament (Marcion), or in the Trinity (Arians, Sabellians), or in Christ (Apolinarians) – the term acquired a negative connotation.<sup>40</sup>

Concepts, and among them ἀσυγχύτως cited above, often mark boundary points, opening up perspectives for exploration. Not becoming “mixed up with” can mean a variety of models of relationships. It may indicate some form of interpenetration, cooperation, harmony, divinization, etc. A negative term opens up a wide range of possibilities for exploration.

Not surprisingly, subsequent Councils of the Church, continuing the thinking present at the Council of Chalcedon, gave impetus to further interpretations of the concept. The canons of the Second Council of Constantinople provide the following interpretation of the relationship of the two natures in Christ:

37 Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 34–48.

38 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 59–60.

39 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 84.

40 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 84.

If anyone saying ‘in two natures’ does not profess the one Jesus Christ our Lord to be acknowledged in Godhead and manhood, in order to signify by this the difference of the natures from which the ineffable (ἄφραστος) union took place without merger, and without either the Word being changed into the nature of the flesh or the flesh transformed into the nature of the Word (for each remains what it is by nature even after the hypostatic union), but understands this expression in respect of the mystery of Christ in terms of a division into parts or, while professing the number of natures in respect of the same, one Jesus Christ our Lord, God the Word incarnate, does not understand the difference of these elements from which he was compounded to be in perception alone ... let him be anathema.<sup>41</sup>

The conciliar text introduces the category of impossibility expressed by the *adiectivum verbale* ἄφραστος. This union of two natures without their becoming mixed up is impossible to describe. Thus, there is an indication of the boundaries for theological expression. It is impossible to express in words the nature of the union of natures in Christ.

Not only philosophy and theology but also the official teaching of the Councils since the Council of Chalcedon contain a fair amount of apophaticism which would be commented on and developed by subsequent Councils.

The Fourth Council of Constantinople (869), citing the Second Council of Nicea and collecting together its statements scattered in various points, took an important step forward and presented the figure of Jesus Christ in the language of paradox: “Likewise we recognize that the seventh holy ecumenical council, the second to be held at Nicaea, pronounced orthodox doctrine when it professed one and the same Christ and Lord, invisible and visible, incomprehensible and comprehensible, infinite and finite, impassible and passible, indescribable and describable.”<sup>42</sup>

Apophatic thinking found on the pages of the documents of the Councils of the first millennium, evolved not only in the sense that certain concepts changed their meaning but also developed from pointing out the limits of orthodox thinking to specifying the limits of language and then using the language of paradox.

This raises the question of whether too little emphasis on apophaticism results in too much absolutization of particular approaches and systems and the resulting limited ability to think in terms of ecumenism and dialogue.

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<sup>41</sup> Straub, *Concilium Universale*, 217.

<sup>42</sup> “Sicut etiam septimam sanctam et universalem in Nicaea secundo celebratam synodum orthodoxe dogmatizasse novimus, unum et eundem Christum dominum invisibilem et visibilem professam, et incomprehensibilem et comprehensibilem, et incircumscriptum et circumscriptum, impassibilem etiam et passibilem, atque inscriptibilem et scriptibilem.” (Leonardi – Placanicæ, *Gesta sanctæ*, 339–340).

## 5. Inspiring Various Scientific Disciplines for Defining Their Cognitive Boundaries

Despite the progress of science, the existing world remains a mystery. What was the experience of ancient philosophy and theology also becomes to some extent the experience of exact sciences. This can be seen especially in the areas of mathematics and physics.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was a widespread belief among people of science that neither mathematics nor physics had its limitations and that in a short time, all controversial issues would be solved.<sup>43</sup> The early 20th century showed how wrong they were. It turned out that mathematics has its limitations. Limitative theorems helped to point to the limits of science. This is especially true of Gödel's theorems.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it turns out that rich logical systems contain propositions that cannot be derived from the axioms of the system. It is not possible to simultaneously determine the incompleteness and non-contradiction of rich logical systems.<sup>45</sup> The problem is not that it cannot be done today, but that it is impossible to do it. What it is about, is a limitation that is not caused by external factors and is not possible to overcome. This leads to one of the limits of science.

A similar situation is encountered at the level of quantum physics. According to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, it is impossible to know the present moment in all its possible determinants. Accurate measurement of a particle's momentum or its coordinates combines an objective element with a subjective decision. Every observation is a form of choice that limits future possibilities.<sup>46</sup> Although exact sciences seem to be completely objective, apparently, the element of subjectivity also plays an important role in them.

Analogous is the Löwenheim–Skolem theorem, which points to an unexpected property of language. There are certain impassable limits of description. A set of axioms introduced to describe simple structures can also constitute a correct description of a completely different domain. Therefore, this represents some form of linguistic blurring.<sup>47</sup> Language also has its limitations.

Not only theology, but also mathematics, physics, and language have their limits to cognition. Discovering more limits is probably only a matter of time. It is difficult to say to what extent negative theology, using *adiectiva verbalia*, which often emphasize limits and inaccessibility, can inspire other disciplines of knowledge, especially exact sciences. Their impressive development may give rise to the belief that no cognitive boundaries exist at all.

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<sup>43</sup> Życiński, *Elementy filozofii nauki*, 355–357.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion of Gödel's theorem, cf. Krajewski, *Twierdzenie Gödla*.

<sup>45</sup> Liana, "Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja," 147.

<sup>46</sup> Liana, "Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja," 149–150.

<sup>47</sup> Życiński, *Elementy filozofii nauki*, 366–372.

Limitative theorems are a harbinger that what theological reflection is grappling with can also be a challenge to other disciplines of knowledge. The emphasis on the mystery of God, found in theology, is gaining confirmation in other sciences. Not only God but also man and the world hide their secrets inaccessible to human cognition.

This raises the question: to what extent do the limitations faced by theology concern the deepest structure of the created world and will therefore become further challenges for exact sciences in the future?

## Summary

The contribution of apophatic theology can be seen in various areas of theology, philosophy, or culture at large. What the contemporary apophatic reflection is missing is a thorough discussion of Greek literature from before Plato and Pythagoras: be it Homer's poems or Greek tragedy. All too easily does modern reflection reduce the theology present on the pages of the oldest monuments of Greek writing to anthropomorphic theology, when, meanwhile, the gods, who take on various human shapes, are not mere phantoms but persons who can be touched, hurt, and caused pain. Immortals, however, are separated from mortals by the chasm of death. None of the gods of Greek mythology could die, however, a mortal could become immortal.<sup>48</sup> Thus, even the oldest Greek written texts contain simultaneously anthropomorphic and apophatic depictions, combining them harmoniously. Anthropomorphism and apophaticism are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

For centuries, it was reflection on God that was imbued with apophatic thinking. With the Council of Chalcedon, negative theology extended its interest to reflection on the relationship between God and man. Today, one can speak of apophatic anthropology. However, there is a lack of thinking and speaking in apophatic terms about, for example, Mariology or other theological treatises. It would seem that apophatic thinking still has new unexplored spaces to explore. Even a superficial look at the terminology cited in the *Corpus Marianum Patristicum* reveals a significant number of negative terms used by the first centuries of Christianity to describe the Mother of Our Lord.<sup>49</sup> This subject matter is not addressed in contemporary literature.

Apophaticism is not an expression of scientific helplessness, the result of internalizing religion, or a fascination with Eastern religions. It is an expression of a search so advanced that it reaches the limits of cognition. Not only is this type of thinking not

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<sup>48</sup> Drzyżdżyk, *Chrystologia*, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Campos, *Corpus Marianum patristicum*.

self-destructive and does not have to be so,<sup>50</sup> but it can contribute to the development of not only theology or philosophy but also culture and even exact sciences.

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Research into the origins of apophatic thinking shows that it has accompanied man in various forms since times immemorial. It is found as early as in the oldest known testimonies of European writing, such as Homer's epics, which, despite obvious anthropomorphizations, show the gods as having a nature different from that of mortals. Also, the earliest Greek philosophers, although they inherited the polytheistic and anthropomorphic Homeric "faith," sometimes spoke out in a very harsh tone against the idea of gods "made in the image of man." The recognition of God as an absolutely incorporeal and transcendent entity, which was implemented in the systems of Plato and Aristotle, did not mark the end of apophaticism; on the contrary, it became the starting point for negative theology, which developed with great vigor in Neo-Platonic doctrines, those of pagans (Plotinus, Proclus), but also those of Christians (Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor). The apophatic thought of the East was also taken up and developed by great Western theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart. Nowadays, it is experiencing its heyday, the reasons for which may be manifold: a growing awareness of religious pluralism, the mood of atheistic secularism present in many modern societies and the associated aversion to traditional religious beliefs and values, or the postmodern fondness for categories such as: "difference," "absence," and "otherness."<sup>51</sup> These circumstances encourage theologians and philosophers to re-think the issues related to apophaticism.

The editors of *Verbum Vitae* have decided to engage in the ongoing contemporary debate by proposing a rather broad topic, "Negative Theology: From Anthropomorphism to Apophaticism," to allow the broadest possible range of scholars to take part in it. Articles submitted from a wide range of academic centers, both abroad (Australia, USA, UK) and in Poland, present a broad spectrum of issues. They include biblical, theological, philosophical, religious-study, historical, philological, logical, as well as anthropological perspectives. As it turns out, apophaticism can be found in various religions, various Christian denominations, a variety of philosophical orientations, and even in various disciplines of knowledge. It seems to be an essential feature in human thinking in general, not only about God, but also about man and the world.

The submitted texts refer to ancient, medieval, as well as modern times. Some publications focus on the presentation of apophaticism emerging from the pages

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<sup>50</sup> Scott – Citron, "What is Apophaticism?," 23.

<sup>51</sup> Por. Davies – Turner, *Silence and the Word*, 1–2.

of Scripture, analyzing whether its relevance to understanding God or Old Testament theophanies as interpreted by Philo of Alexandria;<sup>52</sup> others reveal the apophatic thinking of ancient writers from Plato to John of Damascus.<sup>53</sup> The achievements of medieval literature are presented from the perspective of Islam as well as Dante and Palamas.<sup>54</sup> Much space is devoted to analyses of contemporary reflection on apophaticism shown from the perspective of either philosophy or theology, or even logic. Some take the form of a detailed analysis of a narrow issue,<sup>55</sup> while others are in the form of synthesis.<sup>56</sup> Despite such a broad spectrum of issues addressed, they do not exhaust the entire breadth of thinking in terms of apophaticism. Rather, they point out directions that can inspire further scientific inquiry.

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