

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT GOD TODAY?

Danijel TOLVAJČIĆ

Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb  
Vlaška 38, p.p. 5, HR – 10000 Zagreb  
danijel.tolvajcic@kbf.unizg.hr  
dtolvajcic@gmail.com

Since the beginning of Christianity, one of the central issues of theological and philosophical thought has undoubtedly been the problem of religious language: how to talk about God adequately? Humankind's earliest insights into the encounter with the Holy, which in themselves express »fascinans et tremendum«, have culminated in different discourses, ideas, written testimonies, religious statements, and systems about the Holy, the Absolute, the Transcendent and God.

As this is true on a general (religious) level, it is even more true when we consider the possibilities of expressing and talking about God from a Judeo-Christian perspective.

The God of Christianity represents a radical discontinuity with earlier conceptions of the divine; the gods of the Greek or other pantheons are undoubtedly very powerful beings, but they are ultimately part of the world: they are part of the worldly causes and – for example in Greek mythology – are themselves subject to fate. The Christian God is not part of the world, nor does He have any instance above Himself. That would deprive Him of divinity. He is above all the Creator of the world – that which all that is makes to be – thus there can be no reciprocity between the creature and the Creator. God creates a world and therefore cannot be a part of it. As R. Sokolowski says:

»If we examine pagan thinking about the divine, we do not find the issue of creation raised in the way it is raised in Christianity, nor do we find the understanding of God that is maintained by Christians. In Greek

and Roman religions, and in Greek and Roman philosophies, god or the gods are appreciated as the most powerful, most independent and self-sufficient, most unchanging beings in the world, but they are accepted within the context of being. Although god or the gods are conceived as the steadiest and most complete beings, the possibility that they could be even though everything that is not divine were not, is not a possibility that occurs to anyone. The being of pagan gods is to be a part, though the most important part, of what is; no matter how independent they are, the pagan gods must be with things that are not divine.<sup>1</sup>

Such a new and radical understanding of the divine has resulted in philosophers and theologians having to reinvent and articulate an adequate religious language. In particular, the question arose: how can we speak about the One who is immeasurably greater than anything we can even say and think about? Although God is not part of the world, we are beings that are part of the world and the starting point of our speech about God has to be the world.

We find the classic patristic doctrine in Dionysius the Areopagite who articulates the three-tiered path of naming God. This will go on to influence all later traditions and peak with Thomas Aquinas. There are three paths towards the knowledge of God: causality (via causalitatis), negation (via negativa), and eminence (via eminentia). We come to God – because we cannot do otherwise – through His creatures in an imperfect way by denying all things of Him, surpassing all, to contemplate Him as their cause.

Aquinas follows the same division starting from the insight (after discussing the question of God's existence) that we cannot know what God is, but rather only what God is not: we do not have any quidditative knowledge of Him. God's nature is beyond our understanding, however, as every cause communicates some likeness of itself to its effect, we can speak analogically about God (because He is the first cause of everything that is, and creatures reflect His perfections in some way). All words applied to God do not mean exactly the same when applied to creatures, yet neither do they mean something completely different. Aquinas established the doctrine of the analogy of the being, a classic solution to the problem of adequate religious language.

<sup>1</sup> Robert SOKOLOWSKI, *The God of Faith and Reason. Foundations of Christian Theology*, Washington, 1995, 12.

\*\*\*

Obviously we must not lose sight of the contemporary struggles with religious language: issues pertaining to verification and falsification (in authors such as Ayer and Flew) who considered all metaphysical, ethical and religious claims meaningless, but later proved to be invalid under the weight of their own principles; Wittgenstein's theory of language games that opens a space for meaningfulness of religious statements in a religious context (by playing religious »language game«); hermeneutics which (starting with Schleiermacher, who was the first to articulate it as a separate discipline) in the Christian context tries to understand the meaning of religious language (especially that of the Holy Scriptures), up to the linguistic turn in philosophy; »narrative theology« which attempts to understand and narratively convey God's message; to structuralism and post-structuralism, which strive to understand religious language starting from cultural patterns.

To this day, the question of religious language remains a central problem for Christian theologians and philosophers.

\*\*\*

Recognizing the problem of religious language as one of the central issues for Christianity, the topic of the 46th International Symposium of Philosophy and Theology Professors was »Talking about God Today. Perspectives of Religious Language in Contemporary Theology and Philosophy«. The symposium was organized by the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb (Croatia), in co-organization with the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Graz (Austria), the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Hercegovina) and the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek (Croatia), and it took place in Hrvatsko Zagorje, in Hotel Trakošćan from 4 to 6 April 2024.

Austrian, Slovenian, Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croatian theologians and philosophers approached the problem of religious language, (as well as the related topics), with profound seriousness, and in their presentations sought to illuminate new perspectives and offer new interpretations to classic solutions. Lectures – which were highly commendable – showed that religious language is a permanent challenge for every new generation of Christian thinkers and that the mystery of God can always be expressed in new and fresh ways. Some of the lectures are published in the current issue of *Bogoslovska smotra*, which will enable the interested reader to immerse himself in this rich topic.