

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF THE RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE. SIX THESES

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Abstract

Assuming that the philosophical criticism of the metaphysical understanding of God also affects the language of Christian theology about God, it is necessary to think about the religious language of the Bible and discern what its polyphony lets us 'hear' about God. God is the relational point of all discursive forms of biblical language: narrative, legislative, prophetic, wise, hymnic; they all visualise and name Him, He makes them coherent, but also eludes everyone. Therefore, God's name cannot be 'blended' with the concept of God; therein lies the theological problem of religious language. However, the perspectives of a 'touching' opinion of God on the path of analogy and naming God in people's religious relationship (faith and prayer as 'faith that speaks') are emerging. Therefore, it is possible to shift the perspective and explore the religious problem of theological language, as that leads to a critique of the metaphysical understanding of God.

Key-words: religious language, Bible, God-talk, name, concept, discourse

Introduction

The subject of our contemplation is the religious language of the Christian religion, particularly its discourse about God (God-Talk). We distinguish between two basic levels of this language: the abstract level of theology and its concepts, and the polyphony of discursive forms found in the Bible; this forms the foundation of theology and its discourse about God. Therefore, the perspective and focus are not on religious experience (regardless of how it is understood: in a cognitive, practical, or emotional sense); nor are we concerned

with proofs of God's existence or the language of speculative theology and philosophy of religion. Instead, the focus is on what precedes all of that: the meaning and nature of religious language or discourse. We perceive discourse as a group of statements that belong to a unique formation system, specifically associated with religion in this case. – We plan to explore the relationship between the two levels of religious discourse through six theses, drawing on insights from P. Ricoeur and B. Welte.

Thesis 1.

In the Septuagint, the biblical name of God (Exodus 3:14 – *ehjeh ašer ehjeh, Ego sum qui sum; Jhwh, qui est*) was translated with the Greek expression for being (ὁ ὢν, ptc. praes. from εἶναι), which later became part of subsequent theology and metaphysics. Consequently, God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, embodying the perfect identity of *essentiae* and *existentiae* of His being; He is *ens a se* and ultimately *ens causa sui*. Before this God, man cannot behave religiously; according to the views of philosophers and theologians inspired by Heidegger's critique of modern metaphysics, this determination of God falls under the criticism of ontotheology. This represents the God of modern theism, whose death was proclaimed by Nietzsche.

The opinion of the French historian of medieval philosophy and theology, E. Gilson, is well-known and reads as follows: »there is indeed no metaphysics in the Book of Exodus«, but nevertheless, »there exists a metaphysics of Exodus that was early formed in the Church Fathers; it was then upheld by philosophers in the Middle Ages«; »God is one, and that God is Being; this is the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy, and it was not laid by Plato or Aristotle, but by Moses.«¹ It's not about the complete merging of the word of God's revelation to Moses and philosophical argument, but about the conviction of the Eastern Church Fathers, and in their succession Augustine, according to whom philosophy in its Neoplatonic version is entirely naturally aligned with Christian faith. Thus, Gilson postulates convergence between a faith that seeks understanding and philosophical speculation; this conver-

¹ Etienne GILSON, *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (1931.), Paris, 1989., 44 and 51. Cf. Dominique BOURG, La critique de la »métaphysique de l'Exode« par Heidegger et l'exégèse moderne, in: TRAVAUX DE C.E.R.I.T., *L'Être et Dieu*, Dominique Bourg (ed.), Paris, 1986., 215-244.

gence is achieved when philosophy understands *esse* as *actus purus essendi* (*existendi*).² Some 40 years later, and as a reaction to Heidegger's critique of the alleged confusion between God and being, Gilson emphasizes two things: (1) Kant's critique of classical ontology became possible because late Scholastic (nominalistic) philosophy, inherited by the Neo-Scholastics, forgot the identity of *esse* and *actus purus essendi* and separated essence from existence. (2) The convergence of God spoken of by Scripture and the philosophical concept of being (*esse*) is historically contingent and speculatively fragile. Contingency lies in the fact that nothing in Greek philosophical thought aimed at a fusion of God and being: Greek εἶναι never coincided with any god; there is a gap between the gods of Greek religion and the principles of metaphysics.³ Therefore, Gilson considers it justified to ask how »God came and entered into the realm of being in metaphysics« and »how being entered into theology.«⁴ The verbs in Gilson's sentence – come, invade, enter – signal a contingent event: the unnecessary conjunction of God from Mosaic revelation and the concept of being in Greek philosophy. The conjunction occurred not by the prompting or necessity of philosophy, but within the realm of Christian faith instructed by the Mosaic revelation of God's name (Exodus 3:14) and as a result of its translation into Greek and Latin (Septuagint and Vulgate): God Himself names himself using the words *ehje* and *jvhv* (»I am«, »He is« – ὁ ὢν, *qui sum*). Starting from there, Gilson argues that philosophy, within the context of faith, interprets its subject matter with its own language and concepts, i.e., the object of faith; it does so by using »the language of reason«.⁵ This historically contingent coincidence and subsequent identification of being and God (as Heidegger suggests) are also conceptually fragile, weak, as Pascal points out in his Memorial – the difference appears insurmountable in every respect.

However it may be, we must take into account the contemporary critique of metaphysics and Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God: we are confronted with the non-philosophical origin of God and his philosophical contingency.⁶ God remains someone whom one can pray to and honour, but the expressions for His name – *sum* and *qui est* – now stand in their »splendid

² Cf. *op. cit.*, 51-52.

³ Etienne GILSON, *Constantes philosophiques de l'Être*, Jean-François Courtine (ed.), Paris, 1983., 183.

⁴ *Op.cit.*, 178 and 179.

⁵ »[...] dans le langage de la raison«, *op.cit.*, 191.

⁶ Cf. Paul RICOEUR, *Entre philosophie et théologie II: nommer Dieu*, in: Paul RICOEUR, *Lecture 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*, Paris, 1994., 281-305, here 289 ff. See also *ibid.* *D'un Testament à l'autre*, 355-366, here 357 ff.

isolation«. What was unquestionable from Greek and Latin patristics to Leibniz and Wolff – the convergence, and according to some, the fusion of God and being – has become strange and questionable in our post-metaphysical era. Perhaps this convergence can be called a kind of thought event; if so, then the following question is legitimate: isn't another event of thought precisely the fact that this convergence or fusion has collapsed, thus turning from plausible to dubious? In that situation, it seems advisable to look into the religious language of the Bible and discern what its polyphony reveals about God, and from there, in a kind of retrospective view, perhaps highlight what this could mean for the speech of theology or theological discourse. Certainly, this problem can also be approached in different ways...

Thesis 2.

The discursive forms of biblical religious language, in their rich polyphony, envision and name God, though He eludes them in His hiddenness (mystery, secret). He is the »God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel« (Isaiah 45:15; Habakkuk 3:4). The New Testament echo: »No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known« (John 1:18).

The linguistic testimonies of faith in the Bible (i.e., religious experience) are expressed in various forms of discourse: in narrative, prophetic, legislative, hymnic, confessional, prayerful, and wisdom forms. These are the original linguistic expressions of religious faith (of course, there are also other expressions of it found in the visual arts, architecture, and the crafting of various objects, bearing in mind that all these are also realized within the context of language). It is the task of hermeneutics, as the art of interpreting texts, to recognise and describe the respective forms of discourse in which the faith of the community has found its linguistic expression. These forms of discourse, taken together, delineate the space of interpretation within which religious language can and should be understood.

The discursive forms of religious language express some meaning; they signify something – this is their pretension, and this is understood within the community of believers in which these forms originated. Their meaning becomes apparent not only in the separate observation and interpretation of each of them, but even more differentiated when taking into account the articulations or composition and integrations of the respective forms of

discourse.⁷ Different styles of expression can be observed when considering the three major groups of Old Testament books: historical, prophetic and wisdom, as well as the New Testament Gospels, the history of the early Christian community, epistles, and apocalyptic visions. As an example, we take the narrative text.

The narrative text speaks of the past liberation in the so-called historical traditions; these traditions are centred around one central event that forms their core, encapsulating the collective memory of the community of believers. What it surely encompasses are the narrative sections of the book of Exodus and the narrative parts of the subsequent books; they are combined with legislative texts, often accompanied by a kerygmatic note, and their core is the so-called small historical Creed (Credo) found in Deuteronomy 6:21b-24: »We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand [...] to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors.« This is followed by the legislative part, actually a reminder of the corpus of laws that were previously mentioned: »The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.« The law (Hebrew *Torah*, instruction, teaching, guidance; hence in Greek and Latin translation νόμος and *lex*, i.e., law) that is to be upheld (imperative) is based not on an obscure decree/decision of God's will, but on the fact of liberation (indicative) understood as a free gift from God. And the meaning or direction that these texts indicate is: freedom and a good life in the promised land.⁸

Narrative texts contain two elements: a historical reference in the form of storytelling of liberation and other events, and a kerygmatic dimension, i.e., a proclamatory content, essentially delivering a message »for life«; instructions, in fact, are a part of the message. Through this, faith in God is expressed in a specific way each time, and within that expression of faith in God, there is also a confessional speech about God, i.e., who He is and what He does, or perhaps

⁷ When taken together, e.g., in pairs, certain forms of Biblical discourse, the tensions between them are easily observed: narrative versus prophetic text, legislative versus wise text, hymnal versus wisdom text (e.g., proverbs), narrative versus legislative text, legislative versus prophetic text, etc. All of these should be considered within the totality of the biblical canon, thus indicating their closed nature as a corpus of texts.

⁸ Hence, it is necessary to subject to criticism Jan Assmann's thesis, according to which the central focus of interest in the Old Testament books is the affirmation of the truth of monotheism and the refutation of polytheism, from which the epic tale of violence in the religious history of so-called monotheistic religions would be derived. Cf. discussion in: Jan-Heiner Tüch (ed.), *Monotheismus unter Gewaltverdacht. Zum Gespräch mit Jan Assmann*, Freiburg i. Br., 2015.

more precisely: what He does that others do, such as Moses. God is always spoken of in the context of His relationship to the people or creation as a whole, and never in the sense of what He is and whether He exists at all. It may be said: His being is being-active-in-relation to the individual, the people, the world.

The narration of the so-called historical books, which recount the history of Israel, largely revolves around God as the liberator/saviour: He is the God of Exodus, the liberator who also enables life in the land where Israel dwells after the Exodus from Egypt. But is He also the God of exile, meaning the time when there is neither land, temple nor cult, but rather servitude in a foreign land, in Babylon? This is what many prophetic texts insist on (e.g. the second Isaiah and Jeremiah): The God of Exodus and the covenant is also the God of exile, free in His relationship with Israel and faithful to His word; in this, in the faithfulness to His own word, lies His truth. The historical fate of the people can be rightly understood from their relationship to God's word, about which the Book of Deuteronomy and the prophetic books from the same and subsequent periods (7th-5th century BC) speak particularly impressively. During this period, on the one hand, the word of commandment is developed down to the smallest details, and on the other hand, it is summarised under the aspect of holiness in the commandment of love (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). An echo and extension of this are the words of the prophets: »I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them [...] then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.« (Ezekiel 11:19-20). And even earlier, the prophet Jeremiah foretold the »word of the Lord« about a new covenant, stating the following: »I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.« (Jeremiah 31:31-34). In the Gospels, however, the aforementioned commandment of love is associated with the narration of the life of Jesus Christ (the Saviour), and the Law of His Kingdom is understood in the proclamation of his resurrection and under the sign of the promise of universal resurrection. In this context, God has been given a new name: Father.

In the psalm texts (praise, thanksgiving, supplication, lamentation), where narrative elements are also mixed, God is addressed in the second person singular: He is »You« for the human »I« which He previously addressed as »you« in the prescriptive and kerygmatic parts of the narrative of liberation and covenant. This perspective is further deepened in the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament.

In the wisdom discourse, the naming of God is less personalised than in other forms, and often emphasises man's insignificance and misunderstand-

ing of God (Job, Ecclesiastes), God's silence and absence, but also – in contrast – the possibility for man to ascend to God through contemplation of creation (the Book of Wisdom). God's hiddenness predominates, certainly unlike some passages in the Psalms and in the texts written by the prophets (e.g., Psalms 22 and 88; Jeremiah, Lamentations).

It is evident from these few examples that God is given different names each time, and that the meaning of each name is revealed by the context in which it is used – indicating that His name cannot be reduced to a concept.

Thesis 3.

In the polyphony of discursive forms of biblical language, God is named differently, always in relation to what He does, gives, or commands, yet never with the pretence of determining His essence and mode of existence. These namings of God cannot be distilled into a singular concept of God, providing a clear definition of *what* God is.

Here, it is important to note the crucial difference between the God of Israel and the God of Greek philosophy (e.g., Aristotle's conception of God).⁹ Concepts such as cause, being or essence, foundation, self-thinking thought, etc., are entirely foreign to biblical traditions. They do not discuss the essence of God or evidence of His existence; rather, they speak about God in accordance with the historical drama of liberation and subsequent enslavement, or more precisely: everything they say about God is previously integrated into the context of the historical drama of liberation and the vicissitudes that follow it. This way of speaking about God is no less meaningful than that found in Greek philosophical discourse; it is divine discourse, theo-logy, which is homogeneous with the structure of a narrative text. Thus, here we encounter discourse about God in the form of a tale of freedom and salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*. If we were to derive a somewhat comprehensive conceptual determination of God from there, then perhaps we could say that it is about a free God. He acts freely, out of love, as tirelessly emphasised by the prophet Hosea (1-3 passim; 11:7-9). This will have its continuation in the New Testament texts that culminate in the message: »God is love« (1 John 4:8.16).

⁹ Beyond the scope of this text lies the difference in the conception of God between the Bible and Greek mythology; this was also significant for the expression of faith among early Christians. Cf. Hugo RAHNER, *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, Zürich, 1957.

It is also important to note the following: tensions in divine discourse between discursive forms are particularly evident when we juxtapose them, for example, the forms of a narrative and a prophetic text.¹⁰ The former has a structure reminiscent of a chronicle: a sequence of events is narrated, intertwined with legislative and kerygmatic elements; the latter is *oraculum*, a prophetic speech that admonishes and interprets the meaning of the events, and possibly announces the consequences of accepting or rejecting the message or observance of the Law. The tension is primarily manifested in the perception of time:¹¹ in the narrative text, time unfolds in a cohesive manner, whereas in the *oraculum*, this continuity is disrupted or even fractured because it involves a break from the past and an uncertain or tragic new beginning. That results with a difference in understanding what is divine or who God is: in the narrative, He is portrayed as the support and foundation of the community, ensuring its survival. The prophetic *oraculum* depicts a mortal threat to people because God no longer appears as a source of support like before, but rather as a judge. In prophetic texts, the creative and liberating dimension of God can only be reached beyond the »shadow of death«, through darkness and looming nothingness (similar to some psalms, expressed in the form of lamentation). The point is that the God of Exodus must also be the God of exile; otherwise, it is not possible to maintain the belief that He should be active in the future, not just in the memory of the past: God is the God of the future.

If we were to examine all discursive forms of the religious language found in the Bible (which is not feasible in this context¹²), God would manifest Himself differently in each of them: as the liberating hero, merciful, intimate, threatening, distant, retreating into the anonymity of cosmic order, a judge, akin to a father and mother... The theological and divine content of these forms of discourse draws its meaning from the amalgamation of all of them. This implies that what lies before us is the polyphony of the biblical text, i.e., its diverse discursive forms, a polyphony that cannot be reduced to a few abstract concepts. The forms of discourse and the theological meanings they convey are interrelated and should be »read« and interpreted as such. This suggests that grasping the theological significance of these forms necessitates embark-

¹⁰ Cf. in more detail Paul RICOEUR, *Nommer Dieu*, in: *Etudes Théologiques & Religieuses*, Numéros hors-série, Supplément au n° 2005/4, 37-56, especially 45-48.

¹¹ We cannot delve into the complex issue of the experience and understanding of time in biblical texts and their differences compared to the same in the Greek cultural (not only philosophical) context; cf. Paul RICOEUR, *Les temps de Dieu biblique*, *Esprit*, n° 391, janvier 2013.

¹² Compare the text by P. Ricoeur cited in footnote 10.

ing on the painstaking path of structural analysis and hermeneutic explication of these texts, always mindful of their polyphonic nature.

Speculative theology, on the other hand, largely followed the path of seeking synthesising concepts in which – when it was believed they had been found – the polyphony of the biblical divine discourse faded and disappeared. This discourse has been and remains a problem for theology, which attempts to resolve it by reducing it to the level of propositions or attitudes. As a result, the name of God, Yahweh, was »melted down« into the concept of God...

Thesis 4.

Naming God and the name Yahweh in Exodus 3:14 emphasise the mysterious presence of God and do not make Him available to people. The name of God is not »melted down« into the concept of God neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament.

All of the above highlights a specific feature of all biblical discursive forms, namely, the biblical poetic language as such; it revolves around its central or focal reference point, setting it apart from all other forms of discourse – God and the naming of God. God serves as the reference point for all forms of biblical discourse, not only when He is directly invoked and named, but also in relation to entirely »earthly« matters of everyday human life and society: all of this is viewed in light of His relationship to people and their relationship to Him, God. Hence, all of this assumes a distinctly religious dimension – the dimension of connection or disconnection from God, but also the possibility of a new connection.

God is the common denominator of mutual linking all biblical discursive forms, also signifying their incompleteness – He is the shared objective they strive for and aim towards, yet which, to each of them and all together, simultaneously eludes them because He cannot be comprehensively articulated by them, let alone encapsulated in a single concept (which is not their intended aim). Their very dynamics remains incomplete because they are unfinishable, which depends on the One they attempt to express – or vice versa (from the perspective of faith): through whom He expresses Himself and communicates, revealing and manifesting Himself as actively Present to His people.

This is also the reason why the word »God« should not be taken as a philosophical concept – for example, as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* or in some other way, as already evident in the array of philosophical and theological concepts of God. This is because the word »God« says more than the word *esse* (being,

Sein, absolute) as it presupposes the entire context of all biblical discursive forms and their meaning in their mutual reference and tension. This is taken into account when it is said that the word »God« is a name, not a concept, and, consistently, in religious discourse, we speak of the naming of God.

The publication of God's name in Exodus 3:14 and all other places in the Bible where the reader encounters God's name are reminders of this. God's name is given in the context of Moses' calling, in the form of the so-called self-presentation formula (*Selbstvorstellungsformel*). In response to Moses' question about the name of the one who sends him, the answer comes: *ehjeh ašer ehjeh*, I am who I am; in the Greek translation *Egò eimì ho ôn*, and in Latin *Ego sum qui sum*. As is known, the historian of medieval philosophy, E. Gilson, saw in this expression the core of biblical metaphysics, more precisely the »metaphysics of the book of Exodus«¹³, thanks to the fusion of the Hebrew »ehyeh or jhvh with the Greek *ho ôn* (present participle *einai*, to be – but with the article for the masculine gender, rather than neutral as is common in philosophical texts). However, the triple repetition of the »ehjeh in the first-person singular (I am, Exodus 3:14), which then culminates in the name Yahweh (third person singular of the same verb »hjh) in the next verse, should be a warning against the sudden assimilation of the Hebrew and Greek meanings of the fundamental word expressing the name of God.¹⁴

If one insists on the narrative level of the relevant biblical passage, there will be a tendency to deny the ontological scope of the expression in verse 14, and its understanding will remain within the ethical dimension reminded by the call addressed to Moses to fulfil the entrusted mission: the wording solemnly expresses the authority of the one who sends and entrusts the mission. However, according to P. Ricoeur¹⁵, it is legitimate to highlight the strangeness of the expression »ehjeh »ašer »ehjeh: it breaks the usual framework of biblical

¹³ Cf. E. GILSON, *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 50-52. On various philosophical and theological interpretations of Exodus 3:14 cf. Alain de Libera – Emilie Zum Brunn (eds.), *Celui qui est. Interprétations juives et chrétiennes d'Exode 3,14*, Paris, 1986.

¹⁴ In this regard, it is worth noting the reflections and translation options of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who, together with Franz Rosenzweig, translated the Hebrew Bible into German: In Exodus 3:14 they translate »Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde« as »I will be there as the one who I will be there«, and Yahweh as »Er ist da, He is here« (Psalm 83:19); cf. M. BUBER, *Über die Wortwahl in einer Verdeutschung der Schrift*, *ibid: Werke. Zweiter Band. Schriften zur Bibel*, München-Heidelberg 1964., 1128 ff. Cf. also p. 619-626; Ps 83:19, *Die Schriftwerke. Verdeutscht von Martin Buber*, Köln 1962., 127. – Ivan Golub proposed the translation for Yahweh as »Prisutni« (the Present One), cf. Ivan GOLUB, *Prisutni. Misterij Boga u Bibliji*, Zagreb, 1969.

¹⁵ Cf. RICOEUR, *D'un Testament à l'autre*, 357 ff.

stories about calling, e.g., prophets, so that a kind of »excess of meaning« contained in the expression's indeterminacy comes to the forefront: it seems to reject Moses' question about the name¹⁶, while affirming presence and opening the future. When connected with the polyphony of forms in the biblical discourse where the name of God appears, a multitude of diverse interpretations beyond the conditionally termed ontotheological ones open up, all the way to the most confusing one: the response is actually not an answer but a rejection of the question, a non-answer that preserves God's *incognito*.¹⁷ The expression seems like an enigma amidst the unique story of calling. Thus, the meaning of God's name gradually unfolds through the circuitous path of exegetical reading and hermeneutic interpretation of all forms of religious discourse. None of them says it all; all converge towards God, yet He eludes each of them. The name cannot be transformed into a concept.

How then to understand the word that has become a name – God? Its correct understanding presupposes following the direction or trajectory of its meaning, i.e., its ability to encompass all partial meanings contained in various biblical discursive forms, as well as their mutual expansion of the horizon, which cannot be limited by the closure of any single one of them. The word »God« serves two functions: it gathers various meanings together, while also embodying an unfulfilled and boundless potential of meaning, which unfolds for the reader of the biblical text and the listener of its message.

Therefore, God as the reference point of all forms of biblical discourse eludes into the infinite, into the unlimited – this is particularly suggested by the structure of various forms of biblical discourse: extravagance in comparisons (especially those in the Gospels), paradoxes of proverbs and wise sayings in the Old Testament, the fragmentation or disintegration of time in eschatological statements and in apocalyptic literature... In all of this, there is a surpassing and transcending of the usual meaning of a word or a name, where poetic language extends beyond itself towards the ineffable, establishing itself as an inherently religious language, i.e. acquiring a religious tone (while still retaining its poetic language).

When we consider New Testament statements about Jesus Christ, particularly in Paul's letters – such as the expression »in Christ« (*en Christô*) – we encounter a unique symbol that embodies all religious connotations: »Christ« is a symbol that encapsulates all the religious meanings found in statements

¹⁶ Compare some related passages: Genesis 32:30; Judges 13:18.

¹⁷ Cf. Genesis 32:30; Judges 14:18.

about God, expressing sacrificial love stronger than death – a love that is unconditionally communicated and given to people, thereby ushering in the presence of the first fruits of the »new world« and the »Kingdom of God« in the midst of history.¹⁸

When all this is taken into account, it becomes apparent that the word »God« carries a depth and comprehensiveness that »being« (*esse*, *Sein*, with or without additions) does not possess. Moreover, in the phrase »in Christ«, the word »God« refers to the gift bestowed upon humanity and the relationship they can have with that gift – in so far as they recognise and accept it.

Thesis 5.

If »no one has ever seen God« but »the one and only Son [...] has made him known« (John 1:18), it seems meaningful to associate the naming of God in Exodus 3:14 with the New Testament sentence: »God is love« (1 John 4:8, 16).¹⁹ Both are connected to what God does and can only be understood from that perspective.

What has been discussed in the previous three theses reveals the shift of God's name from an appellative to a predicative sense, represented in a dual form, both narrative and prescriptive: »I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me« (Exodus 20:2-3; this is intensified and extended in the commandment to love the Lord, Deuteronomy 6:4). Here, an explication of the name of God is given, and perhaps the beginning of a process of contemplating its meaning. We can distinguish two things: (1) The God of Israel is a God-in-relation, i.e., nothing is known about Him that is outside of the relationship God-man, God-people, God-world. (2) This relationship encapsulates a critical juncture characterized by Moses' five objections to God concerning the call and mission (wherein God presents Himself, which alone is insufficient for accepting the call and mission!); he refuses to accept anything and declines the call and mission; eventually, he reluctantly agrees (Exodus 3:1 – 4:17). This critical juncture finds its continuation in prophetic and psalms of laments, accusations, and reproaches directed at God, all of which culminate in Job's polemics and accusations against God (Job 3:1 ff; also, chapter 7, 10, 27, 31, Cf. Psalm 88). Both of these lead to thinking in the direction of Isaiah's statement: »Truly you are a

¹⁸ Cf. Paul RICOEUR, *Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique*, in: Paul RICOEUR, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris, 1986., 129 ff.

¹⁹ Cf. Paul RICOEUR, *D'un Testament à l'autre*, 355-366.

God who has been hiding himself, the God and Savior of Israel« (Isaiah 45:15). God is and remains the Presence, but eludes human grasp.

When we inquire about the identity of the God who is the subject of the sentence »God is love« (1 John 4:8, 16), considering all that Jesus reveals about God in the Gospels, it becomes apparent that it must be the God who disclosed His name to Moses and whom Jesus addresses as His Father and our Father. In doing so, Jesus himself becomes a kind of parable for God, which culminates in John's post-resurrection perspective: »Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father« (John 14:9b) – fundamental for the theology of the early councils. In the sentence »God is love«, emphasis can be placed on the anarthrous predicate noun »love«; the content of the predicate is what God does in and through Jesus Christ for humanity, for his creation – love understood as »an event of unity of life and death in favour of life.«²⁰ The copula »is« can also be emphasised to highlight the truth of the sentence in terms of: »Love is an event of unity of life and death in favour of life«, with a kind of »ontological intensity« (P. Ricoeur). At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the logic of biblical religious discourse prohibits the separation of a sentence into two aspects: (1) God exists; (2) God exists as love. This separation is characteristic of an ontology that permits the distinction between essence and existence, with a consistent emphasis on whether existence follows or does not follow essence. However, in God, love itself is what manifests, so to speak, in one piece: simultaneously as the source of manifestation and as the source of command.«²¹

Thesis 6.

The concept of reaching God with the mind (*mente attingere Deum*, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas) and the *via negativa*, as a central aspect of analogy, take due account to such a state of affairs concerning God. This opens up a mode of discourse that is fitting for God and paves the way to address God in the second person.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 360-362 and 366, with reference to Eberhard JÜNGEL, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, Tübingen 1977, 434-438; »Liebe erschien uns, formal geurteilt, als Ereignis einer inmitten noch so grossen und mit Recht mit so grossen Selbstbezogenheit immer noch grösseren Selbstlosigkeit. Und Liebe wurde, material geurteilt, verstanden als die sich ereignende Einheit von Leben und Tod zugunsten des Lebens«, 434. In this vein, John 12:24 should be understood as an extended metaphor for Jesus: »[...] unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.«

²¹ P. Ricoeur, *op.cit.*, 366.

The mentioned discursive forms of biblical language prefigure what are expressed as boundary concepts in speculative theology on the so-called triple path of analogical discourse about God: *via positiva*, *via negativa*, and *via eminentiae*. When we attribute the concept of being to God (»God is«), it is affirmed and preserved in relation to its content; the same applies to every other concept: unity, beauty, goodness, wisdom, etc., that we attribute to God. This is the first moment or phase of our statements about God: *via affirmationis* or *via positionis*, the path of affirmation, i.e., the expression or establishment of a claim about God (»God is, exists«).

The content of the concept applied to God must undergo a transformation in which he will be negated and destroyed in relation to its limitations: »God is not« (meaning: as created beings are). Therefore, it is necessary to remove or eliminate from God every limitation or imperfection that is inherent in what we attribute to God: *via negationis* or *via remotionis*, the path of negation or removal. In this sense, what Dionysius the Areopagite said holds true: With regard to God, negations are true, and affirmations inadequate.²²

Alternatively, but in the same direction, Anselm of Canterbury demonstrates: God is not just »that than which nothing greater can be conceived, but (is) something greater than can be conceived (*quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*).«²³ This corresponds to the third moment of the analogical discourse about God: the concept of being (and everything that is expressed about God in general) should break through to being that extends all the way to the absolute and is therefore entirely new and unknown to us, beyond our grasp, but which we can (and should) still articulate: »God is Being itself, *Ipsum Esse*.« This is the *via eminentiae* or *via excellentiae*, the path of excellence.

Particularly important are the negative expressions in which God is named in theological discourse, as they remove any form of limitation from God, while eminent expressions leave open the »more« which cannot be expressed as such, but is indicated by superlative expressions in a way that remains unfinished, open-ended (e.g. God is greater than the greatest that can be thought of and expressed about Him). Such analogical modifiers (negative and eminent) aim to abstractly encompass all that we have described as the transcendence of meaning found in the discursive forms of biblical language. However, they lag behind in the plasticity and evocativeness of religious lan-

²² Cf. *De coel. hier.* 2, 3.

²³ *Proslogion* 15 (translated by Matej Jeličić, in: Stjepan Kušar (ed.), *Srednjovjekovna filozofija*, (Hrestomatija filozofije, vol. 2), Zagreb, 1996., 315.

guage. Hence, there arises the need to explain the meaning and limit of such speculative expressions about God.

This can be attempted by deepening the path of negation as the core element of analogical discourse about God, using examples from some texts of Thomas Aquinas, who is otherwise known for developing an exemplary system of conceptual affirmative discourse about God. While this is true, it may be more necessary in today's times to focus on the meaning of the aforementioned path of negation or »removal« (*remotio*) in Aquinas's thought.²⁴

In his most famous work, the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas outlined the paths of thought through which, according to his conviction, the mind can reach God (*quinque viae*, I, 2, 3). Immediately after stating these paths, he discusses what else needs to be done (I, 3, prologue). Namely, after realising that God exists, it is necessary to inquire how or in what way He exists, or what He is. This is accompanied by a short sentence: »[...] *quia de Deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit, non possumus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non si* – Because we cannot know what God is, but only what He is not, we cannot consider how God is, but rather how He is not. This negation is found in the very introduction to the third question in the *Summa Theologica* and appears as an introductory note or even a title before a long series of questions and articles in which Thomas discusses the essence of God and His being. These articles do not intend to positively state what God is, because, in accordance with the introductory note, that cannot be said. The purpose of this discourse on God is for the believer-thinker, on the path of distinction and negation, to *touch upon* the Mystery, the secret of God.

Thomas also theoretically substantiates and develops this negativity as a fundamental feature of human statements about God. He develops the proposition: »*Quod Deus non sit in aliquo genere* – That God is not in any genus.«²⁵ *Genera* or categories (these are the ten Aristotelian categories) indicate both the manner of existence of beings and the manner of speaking about beings. Categories express how something exists and can be, or how the being is at-

²⁴ Bernhard Welte pointed this out in his article *Bemerkungen zum Gottesbegriff des Thomas von Aquin*, in: Bernhard WELTE, *Zeit und Geheimnis. Philosophische Abhandlungen zur Sache Gottes in der Zeit der Welt*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1975., 219-227; here we follow his presentation; about Thomas Aquinas see also Josef PIEPER, *Unaustrinkbares Licht. Das negative Element in der Weltansicht des Thomas von Aquin*, München: Kösel 1964 This thought was originally elaborated by Meister ECKHART, *Knjiga božanske utjehe*, Zagreb, 1991.

²⁵ Cf. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, pars I, q. 25; *Summa theologiae*, pars I, q.13, a. 5. – For whole thesis 6 cf. Stjepan KUŠAR, *Škriveni Bog. Pokušaji na razmeđu filozofije i teologije*, Zagreb, 2024., 107-143.

tributed and can attribute its »beingness« (i.e., that it is). Whenever something is affirmed, it is thereby expressed or intended to express how the respective being is; the statement indicates the existence of the respective being in accordance with the manner in which its existence (»beingness«) is proper to it.²⁶ Therefore, when Thomas asserts that God is not in any genus, i.e. category, he thereby also says that God is not someone who receives existence or who has existence nor does he belong to categories. He is not like the beings of the world; he is not integrated into the world as the comprehensive composition of all real and possible beings; God is not the world, nor is he identical with it; he is *present to everything* (dative!) as the one who »is« beyond, above, and transcending everything. Therefore, God »is« beyond all possible modes of understanding thought and expression; he is incomprehensible and inexpressible, unfathomable – beyond the modes of understanding and expressing everything that exists.

However, according to Thomas, this does not imply that thought and speech lack justification or authority to express anything about God. Thomas makes a clear distinction between thought that comprehends, i.e., »grasps« the object presented to it, and thought that merely reaches its object; he applies this directly to thought concerning God: »[...] *comprehendere Deum impossibile est cuicumque intellectui creato, attingere vero mente Deum qualitercumque magna est beatitudo* – No created intellect can comprehend God, but to reach God with the mind in any way is indeed a great blessedness.«²⁷ This means that what cannot be fully comprehended can still be approached or experienced through the inherent limitation of incomprehensibility. Therefore, our comprehension advances further by encountering the incomprehensible rather than by merely comprehending the comprehensible. In this affective thought, all negativity transforms into sublime positivity, which cannot be expressed by affirmative or positive expressions.

By reaching with the mind the unfathomable and inexpressible mystery of God, man affirms Him in His reality, completely surrendering to Him. In this affirmation, the mystery is embraced as the reality of all realities, beyond all comprehension and individual expression of the comprehensible in judge-

²⁶ This is in line with Aristotle's expression »as many ways as something is said to be, so many ways it is said to be« (*Met.* 7, 1017a 23) and that »to be (τὸ ὄν) is said in many ways«.

²⁷ *Sth*, pars I, q. 12, a. 7; Thomas refers to Augustine, *Sermo CXVII*, 3,5 (PL 38,663): »De Deo loquimur, quid mirum si non comprehendis? Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus. Sit pia confessio ignorantiae magis, quam temeraria professio scientiae. Attingere aliquantum mente Deum, magna beatitudo est; comprehendere autem, omnino impossibile.«

ment. Thomas points this out in the aforementioned prologue to the third question of his *Summa Theologica* when he states that through the Five Ways (*quinque viae*), we come to know that God exists, but we can never reach insight into His divine essence, i.e., what and how He is in Himself. Knowledge of the »that« without understanding the »what«: this is the affirmation and acceptance of reality beyond conceptual understanding and expression in sublime reaching. When the mind recognises that the unfathomable and inexpressible has been reached, it can be rightly said that its reality has been affirmed beyond comprehension.²⁸

This means that the reality being considered (God) is contemplated and affirmed here, but within confines of the human mind. However, according to Thomas, this contemplation and affirmation of God's reality differs from the way God is in Himself, in His own reality. Clearly, even when we accurately conceive and express God's reality (»that« He exists), we should not presume that we have grasped this divine reality as He realizes it in Himself. On the contrary, we conceive, affirm, and express it solely within the limitations of human thought and speech; in doing so, we refer to one of the realities known to us, which is an entirely different reality, beyond all modes of human cognition and expression (cf. *Deus non est in genere aliquo*, Sth I, 13, 5). Therefore, not only does God's essence (*essentia*, »what« God is) elude our understanding, but also God's *actus essendi* (i.e., God's own act of being). This holds true even when we mentally arrive at the statement »that God actually exists« (*quod Deus actu sit*). The affirmative aspect, inherent in the copula »is« of the judgement that expresses God's existence, certainly contains truth, yet it does so in a manner that transcends and surpasses its own definitive form. The affirmation of God's unfathomable reality, which our cognition can conceive and articulate, transcends itself, its own form, and points towards the realm of ineffability.²⁹

In the same vein, an earlier statement by Thomas asserts: »Since our mind cannot be compared to the divine being, what the divine being is surpasses our mind and thus remains unknown to us. Therefore, the ultimate in human knowledge of God is knowing that he knows that he does not know God (*sciat se Deum nescire*), if he realizes that what God is exceeds all that we know about him.« »*Rationabiliter comprehendit incomprehensibile esse* – Anselm of Canterbury would say, »He rationally understands the incomprehensible.«³⁰

²⁸ Cf. Bernhard WELTE, *Bemerkungen*, 222 ff.

²⁹ Cf. also *Scg* 1, 30, 36.

³⁰ Thomas AQUINAS, *Quaest. disp. de potentia Dei* q. VII, a. 5, ad 14. For Anselm's expression, see *Monologion* 64. – On the degrees of knowledge of God cf. in Thomas AQUINAS,

Crucial to analogy is that its other side, specifically the content of the mystery of the divine Origin as such and in itself, cannot be directly and positively understood. Viewed from the perspective of finite beings such as humans, it remains an inexpressible content. Methods and forms of thought indeed convey something to affective thought; they are not empty. But the content itself, as it is in itself, remains unfathomable and inexpressible. The affirmation of affective thought is not devoid of substance; it represents a fulfilled affirmation and genuine mental engagement, irrespective of how far the subject transcends the images and forms through which it is perceived. In its similarity, there is even greater dissimilarity.

Therefore, Thomas can assert: »Although it is permitted in some respects to concede that the creature is similar to God, however it must not be conceded in any respect that God is similar to the creature – *Licet aliquo modo concedatur, quod creatura sit similis Deo, nullo tamen modo concedendum est, quod Deus sit similis creaturae.*«³¹ God is not shaped according to the creature, but the creature according to God; therefore, it is possible to »look« towards God through thought starting from the creature. The creature speaks to the thinking mind about its Prototype; what it communicates is neither emptiness nor insignificance. However, the Prototype is entirely distinct in its own completeness, incomparability, and significance. Once again: In its similarity, an even greater dissimilarity.

Thus understood, analogy is not some trick of reason by which man will somehow reach God in thought. On the contrary, analogy is a path into the

In Boet. De Trinitate, q. I, a. 2 resp.): although the human mind in the knowledge of God does not reach the knowledge of »what,« but of »that,« it still progresses in three ways. First, it knows Him through His action in creation (*in producendo res*). Second, it knows Him as the cause of nobler effects that bear some resemblance to Him, thereby emphasising His excellence more (man as the image of God). Third, it knows Him as the one who is increasingly distant from everything manifested in His effects. In the words of Dionysius the Areopagite: God is known as the cause of all, as transcending all, and as being removed from all (*cognoscitur ex omnium causa et excessu et ablacione*). Furthermore (ad 1): it is said that at the end of our knowledge of God, we perceive Him as the unknown (*tamquam ignotum*) because then it is revealed that our mind has progressed the most in knowledge when it has realized that the essence of God surpasses everything that can be understood while we are on the journey (*in statu viae*); although what He is remains unknown, it is known that He is. The fact that through the divine revelation in Jesus Christ, we know God as the Triune does not eliminate His mystery discussed here but rather highlights it more strongly.

³¹ *Sth*, pars I, q. 4, a. 3, ad 4, with reference to Dionysius the Areopagite (*De div. nom.*, 9), who states that there is reciprocity in similarity among those belonging to the same order of beings, but there is no reciprocity of similarity between the cause and what it has caused; it can be said that an image is similar to a man, but not vice versa.

mystery of Fullness which is beyond all the powers and possibilities of our thinking and disposition. The analogy thus enables us to affirm not only the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God (*via negativa*) but also God's presence in the world (*via positiva*), which, surpassed on the negative path, opens the path of excellence (*via eminentiae* or *excellentiae*) where the fullness and limitlessness of every perfection attributed to God are affirmed. Through the participation of everything that exists in the Prototype, it can be said that He is omnipresent, transcendent, and immanent.

Therefore, Thomas also emphasizes that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, the self-subsistent, boundless, and unfathomable fullness of being that is never exhausted by anything. There is no potentiality in Him that is yet to be realised. As the absolutely perfect fullness of being, God is the pure act of being (*actus purus essendi*). In Him, essence and existence (*essentia, esse*) are identical; He is the real and complete realisation of His own being (while, for example, humans realise themselves successively in space and time), and is therefore absolutely simple and unchangeable. His eternity does not only mean exemption from time but also that He is the Origin and Goal, the beginning and the end. His eternity – to use the words of Boethius, as Thomas did – is »*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*, both the whole and perfect possession of endless life.«³² He is the living God.³³ Therefore, it can be said that His relationship with everything that happens and comes into being in time is a relationship of simultaneity.³⁴

It is evident that analogy does not place God in our hands, but rather elevates and draws us to Him. Therefore, it could be argued that the religious problem of theological language lies herein: how to transition from speaking about God in the third person to addressing Him in the second person, from

³² Cf. *Sth*, pars I, q. 10, a. 1; BOETHIUS, *Consol.*, V, 6, 4. Croatian translation: A.M.S. BOETHIUS – BOETIJE, *Consolatio Philosophiae. Utjeha filozofije*, Alojz Čubelić (ed.), Zagreb, 2021., 216.

³³ Cf. *Sth*, pars I, q. 14, a. 5; q. 18, a. 3; q. 19, a. 1.

³⁴ In later centuries, attempts were made to conceive of God as *ens a se*, while all other beings were *entia ab alio*, meaning caused by another being, ultimately by the First Cause. The divine aseity attempts to express the same idea as Thomas Aquinas with his concept of *Ipsum esse subsistens*, but emphasises that God is from Himself and of Himself, that He has not come into being nor depends on anything, that He is unconditional reality, the Absolute. The concept of *ens a se* directly denotes only the negative aspect: it is not from another, while the positive foundation and reason are better expressed by the concept of *Ipsum esse subsistens*. The concept of God as *ens causa sui* does not capture Thomas's thought on God but rather reflects later modern rationalism; *ens causa sui* for Thomas is man, cf. *Scg* II, 58; Bernhard CASPER, Der Gottesbegriff *ens causa sui*, in: *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 76 (1968/69), 314-331.

»He« to »Thou«? This is resolved on the path of the analogy of faith, where the Father, through the Son in the Spirit, leads people to Himself: The Son is the way, and the Spirit bestows communion.

In this context, there exists a space where the act of speaking *about* God transcends into speaking *to* God: the shift from the third person singular to the second person – that is the prayer of praise to God, a prayer that can be expressed in words (praise, gratitude, supplication, lamentation, protest) or in reverential silence; the silence of the creature before the Creator, the silence of love. Prayer addressed directly to God (second person) is no longer merely an apophantic logos, a word that conveys something about someone, but rather a logos that articulates the ineffable and the abundance of feelings experienced by the creature before its Creator. The language of silence articulates a twofold ineffability: the ineffability of the Creator and the ineffability of the emotions evoked within the creature engulfed by its Creator and by what He does and gives to it. In silence, there is a gesture of worship and praise, yet it can also give birth to the word of worship and praise, a word that – to truly correspond to the one to whom it is directed, God – once again merges into silence.³⁵ It makes sense to speak of mystical silence in this context.

God's incomparability is inexpressible, so it must be said that in this sense, God simply resembles no one and nothing – but precisely this inexpressible incomparability forbids us from remaining silent about Him. And when we speak about Him, we surpass ourselves and our discourse into the realm of the inexpressible: in its similarity, there is an even greater dissimilarity. Should we not, then, perceive God as the one who opens up new realms of discourse for us? Moreover, is He not, in Himself and above all, the very realm of discourse, the conversation of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit?

³⁵ Cf. on the prayer of silence and the words in Bernhard WELTE's *Filozofija religije*, Zagreb, 2016., 172-191. A medieval example is given by Bonaventure in the final seventh chapter of his *The Soul's Journey into God*, entitled: »On the mental and mystical excess, in which rest is given to the intellect, by an affection passing wholly into god through excess« (cf. BONAVENTURA, *Tria opuscula. Breviloquium. Itinerarium mentis in Deum. Reductio artium ad theologiam*, Zagreb, 2009.) 502-507; cf. also Chapter V and Chapter VII: On the sight of the divine unity through its primary name, which is being (486-494) and On the sight of the most blessed trinity in his name, which is the good (495-501).

Sažetak

TEOLOGIJSKI PROBLEM RELIGIJSKOGA JEZIKA BIBLIJE. ŠEST TEZA

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Pod pretpostavkom da filozofijska kritika metafizičkoga poimanja Boga pogađa i jezik kršćanske teologije o Bogu, valja promisliti religiozni jezik Biblije i razvidjeti što njegova polifonija daje 'čuti' o Bogu. Bog je jednošajna točka svih diskurzivnih formi biblijskoga jezika: narativnih, legislativnih, proročkih, mudrosnih, himničkih; sve ga viziraju i imenuju, on ih čini suvislima, ali svima izmiče. Stoga se Božje ime ne da 'pretopiti' u pojam o Bogu; u tome je teologijski problem religioznoga jezika. Otvaraju se međutim perspektive 'dodirujućega' mišljenja Boga na putu analogije i njegova imenovanja u čovjekovu religioznom odnosu (vjera i molitva kao 'vjera koja govori'). Stoga je moguće preokrenuti perspektivu i pitati o religioznome problemu teologijskoga jezika; time se s druge strane doseže kritika metafizičkoga poimanja Boga.

Ključne riječi: religiozni jezik, Biblija, Bog, ime, pojam, diskurs