

The work of academic theology is important when it serves the Church humbly (George Mantzarides, Professor Emeritus of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

On the occasion of the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, we are publishing a text by George Mantzaridis, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which deals with the manner in which Orthodox Theology is produced. This text is a contribution to the more general dialogue which is preceding the discussions of the Pan-Orthodox Synod.

The potential for ecstatic transcendence is part and parcel of human nature. Human nature is a depiction, in the image of God. This does not mean that it is not real. On the contrary it means that it is very real indeed and dynamic. To be more precise, it means that it is personal; in other words, that its reality, its truth, lies in an immediate relationship with its absolute archetype, which lies beyond its relativity. The truth of human nature is transcendental. It is linked to the real Being which it depicts.

People are both infinite and negligible. We are infinite when we remain pure and reflect within us the real Being, God. God is infinite by nature and we, His image, are infinite by Grace. But when we are sullied, i.e. darkened, we are next to nothing. We are infinitely dark and negligible because we tarnish and abrade the archetype within us, the Absolute and Infinite.

Saint Ignatios the God-Bearer writes: 'Hesychast theology hears the 'tranquillity' of God. It carries out the work of Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His teaching' [35]. There is also academic theology which does the work of her sister, Martha, who was swamped with the preparations for Christ's dinner [36]. Without Martha's hard work, the dinner would not have been prepared. Like Mary, Martha loved Christ. He praised the attitude of Mary, however, saying that the 'good portion' would not be taken away from her [37].

Academic theology has always been orientated towards the world and has been

‘cumbered about with much serving’ [38]. It links theology to philology, history, philosophy, sociology and with whatever else it deems useful as a science. It frequently works with great worldly care for the preparation of the Church’s supper, sometimes, indeed, like Martha, declaring its frustration with those who have adopted the attitude of Mary, forgetting Christ’s praise of her. But although it does the work of Martha, it often filches from Mary’s portion. And this creates dangerous conditions for the Church and the faithful.

The work of academic theology is useful and important when it serves humbly, when it investigates and projects the life and tradition of the Church. But it becomes less certain, and even dangerous, when it succumbs to human self-importance and capriciousness. Of particular importance is the reduction of non-empirical theology to a dangerous form of idle talk. Saint Symeon the New Theologian notes that ‘idle talk’ is not merely ‘unprofitable talk’, as one might suppose, but talk which is formulated without empirical awareness of what is being said. When, for example, people preach contempt for worldly glory while not scorning it themselves as being harmful and depriving them of ‘the glory above’, then they are talking idly and are lying. [39].

Academic theology is founded upon knowledge. And it is correct when it is founded on correct knowledge. Empirical theology is not founded upon knowledge. Its foundation is the light. Knowledge is not light. Light, however, is knowledge [40]. Academic theology is properly grounded when it is grounded in the knowledge of light. This foundation enriches academic theology. And academic theologians are duty bound to enrich their mind and their theology with the theology of the light, which involves some form of contact with empirical theology, some kind of exercise of self-emptying and obedience, for the reception of its fruit. Without this prerequisite, academic theology becomes ‘idle talk’ or even ‘lying talk’. According to Saint Diadokhos of Fotiki says” Nothing is poorer than a mind without God pondering on the things of God. [41] Finally, in noting the narrative nature of theology, Elder Sophrony writes that real theology is not the product of human reason nor the result of critical studies, but a revelation concerning that higher Being which people enter through the action of the Holy Spirit [42]. This is why the real approach to the dogmatic teaching of the Church is made through ‘anti-dogmatics’, that is, through personal experience.

Two tendencies can usually be determined within academic theology: the conservative and the progressive. ‘Conservative’ theologians, with their barren pusillanimity and sterility, ‘speak without being’. They are incapable of either promoting or hindering any movement towards the ‘divine fire’ of tranquillity. ‘Progressive’ theologians, with their bold imagination and reflections, attempt to be always in ‘creative’ agreement with secular society. But in this way, real theology is

neither preserved nor moved forward. The hub of the real 'preservation' and, at the same 'progression' of real theology always remains the 'fire of tranquillity'. That which is content with the attitude of Mary. The torch-bearer of this fire is Orthodox hesychasm, which has been preserved over the years and can be felt empirically in each phase of innovation in the Orthodox Church. So hesychasm remains the authentic source for any renovation in the Orthodox Church.

[34] Ignatios of Antioch, op. cit. 15, 2.

[35] See Lk. 10, 39.

[36] See Lk. 10, 40.

[37] See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) Building the Temple of God within us and to our Brothers, Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, Essex 2013.

[38] Lk. 10, 40.

[39] See Symeon the New Theologian, op. cit. 1, 461-8, ed. J. Darrouzès, Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, Traités Théologiques et Éthiques, Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 122, Paris 1966, p. 306.

[40] idem. Κατηχήσεις 28, Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 118, p. 146.

[41] Diadokhos of Fotiki, Κεφάλαια γνωστικά 7, ed. J. E. Weis- Liebersdorf, p. 10.

[42] See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) The Monk of Mount Athos.