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**“Substance without Substance”: the Contemporary Divide
between Form and Substance and the Role of Theology**

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Abstract: Increasingly, it is becoming apparent, that words and terms and definitions, which are associated with ideologies or generally human values are becoming devoid of any substantial content. This is happening while at the same time there is an explosion of values and cultural-religious systems being offered at every corner. Today's virtual realities and forms are moving images devoid of direction and content. Even theology has become a virtual science movable according to fleeting modes of the day. Theology has to rediscover its mystical dimension which is ultimately a dimension of The Holy Spirit and freedom implied meaning that one has the freedom to see beauty and life everywhere and therefore liberate reality, express it substantively, since it is the Creation of God and which is unified to God in a new manner through Christ.

Keywords: Theology, substance, virtuality, beauty, Gregory of Nazianzus, Aristotle.

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...For us the truth lies in things (*pragmata*), not in words (*onomata*).

Gregory of Nazianzus. Or. 29, 13.20–22

I really do not know life at all.

Joni Mitchell. “Both Sides, Now”

Introduction

Increasingly, it is becoming apparent, that words and terms and definitions, which are associated with ideologies or generally human values are becoming devoid of any substantial content. This is happening while at the same time there is an explosion of values and cultural-religious systems being offered at every corner.

The paradox seems to be that the more we talk about values and laws of conduct, the more devoid of substance these laws and values are. The example in the Christian context are famous preachers of the word, who are, able to produce beautiful televised sermons and speeches, while at the same time leading a life of complete sinfulness. The obvious question is, how is this divide between words and content-substance possible?

In this essay I understand the terms *substance-matter-content* in the sense of living truth while the term *form* as the outward expression of this truth. Of course, in Christian theology sinlessness or sanctity means a unity between content and its expression. In this sense Christ embodies this, by being perfect in let's say substance but also in outward form. His preaching and behaviour exactly corresponded to what he was as a sinless perfect human being.

As is well known, Aristotle in his *Physics* offered a concept of matter and form (hylomorphism). There we have the definition of the physical object as consisting of both matter and form. This is also related to his notion of soul and body. With matter-substance is connected (*ousia*) and what he calls as particulars. Change here, is also an important concept. Form is of course something more than the shape or form in the general sense of the word, it is *form* precisely because it expresses the inner essence of the object, or what we might term character in the general sense of the term. For Aristotle it is not possible to conceive of matter without form and vice versa, a concept which in some respects is similar to a Christian understanding.

In our usage here, we might agree with Aristotle but apply this notion in theology in a slightly modified form. In terms of theology we may ask the fundamental question of whether one can express a true form (here in the sense of word-theory) without any true substance-practice. Theology as the word of God always aspires to express and coincide with God's message to humanity, in a certain existential sense to what he is as he manifests Himself. Thus, ideally theology in the theological sense is the same as matter and form in Aristotle, a perfect duality or rather unity of form and essence.

However, in theology just as in culture generally a strange thing can occur. The form can take on a life of its own, the word or culture, or values can simply exist without reflecting any substance. This is not only a theological phenomenon but a cultural one. A culture and theology without substance is destructive, since it deludes, and individuals could be convinced that they are living a life of substance, while they are living only a life of form. Similarly, as if virtual reality replaced reality, while claiming to be the latter.

To be sure this division between outward life or form and substance is a spiritual feature of life and a historical challenge of Christianity present from its beginning. However, it seems that this traditional divide between substance or truth, content and form is increasing in an ever-widening chasm. To give some concrete examples. In Western theological thinking one can be a good theologian without believing in God. What is more astounding one can even be a pastor without believing in God. One gets his state salary and carries on doing the “function” of a priest or pastor. To be fair of course, even in Orthodox theology one is not automatically a good theologian (in the sense of the correspondence between form and substance) just because he or she is Orthodox.

For the purposes of this essay I suggest that apart from moral or other issues the reason why theoretical theology and in a broader perspective culture is somehow living a life of its own without substance is because theology is done in a bad way. Remembering Gregory of Nazianzus whom I draw here as example, one can call this “theology without substance” as sophistic babble.

At first glance looking for the cause of this rift between substance and form we can be suspicious of such theologies as Justification by Faith as the beginning of the journey to this theological faithlessness. Did the ethos of the Reformation serve as the beginning of the end for the Word with a capital W? The reformation accused essentially the Roman Catholic Church of preaching something which it did not embody in substance. It was accused of formalism and ritualism without content.

However, the solution to this was not a renewed emphasis on the dialogue between form and substance but an emphasis on form as automatically supplanting substance while representing itself as substance. Faith without substance was enough to express the content of faith. Justification by faith and other notions were in fact dealing with the problem of the lack of substance by doing away with substance altogether. Thus even Christ in the Eucharist did not really have to be present. The Eucharist became an external formal manifestation of Christ, without his presence. He was really not needed because the Spirit somehow did all the work.

Thus, it was enough to endlessly talk about the Gospel, the Word, and apparently this would somehow lead to true spiritual substance. However, we have been talking about Jesus for some time now and still have not changed to the better.

As is obvious, theology without substance has not led to an automatic sanctification or change. Talking theology or theory is not enough to automatically change ourselves so that our substance corresponds to what we say and believe. Generally, this has translated itself into modern culture where endless talk about humanism and humanist values (which hopelessly correspond to any substance if this is in fact required at all) does not necessarily reflect any substantial change to the better or the implementation of these values. For example, as if often the case ecologists do not change their own ecological habits while insisting on correct forms of ecological theory.

Generally theological method is to blame for this also. Theology is dying because it is no longer theology anymore but a self-sufficient enclosed system operating on some forms of internal rational dynamic. No room for revelation here, no room for mystical theology or miracles. The Gospel must be subordinated to our own subjective limited rational system or at best delegated to some form of narrative and therefore relativized. One can notice this even in Orthodox monographs. A revelatory theology is somewhat out of place in the overall trend of theological systems.

There are abundant publications of contemporary spiritual fathers and saints, their sayings and so on, but this has not translated itself to theoretical and good theological reflection. Thus, we are left with descriptive spirituality. Take it or leave it, according to your spiritual disposition. Patristics is a constant discussion of descriptive nature, when we only are interested in reconstructing what the Fathers said, or did not say without any further theological reflection, exegesis or interpretation. The Fathers are described, published, classified, dissected and therefore deemed basically irrelevant, since they do not offer any theology after these operations conclude.

Systematic theology is only a description at best of historical theology which operates on sound rational, critical principles and is thus systematic only in form. Some Orthodox trends are so embarrassed by the substance offered in Orthodox spirituality, that they employ all sorts of ethical, philosophical and humanist systems in order to fit in this embarrassing mythological material into some form (without substance). This is deemed as good contemporary Orthodox theology, since it has conformed and found a way to some system of thought. Not surprisingly, to make Orthodox theology more relevant there is a new course called Ecumenical theology. A classical case is contemporary Orthodox ecclesiology which is more interested in expressing its content through foreign ecclesiological presuppositions than offering its own independent ecclesial theology.

Theology must rely on a preposition of the internal unity between form and matter and not an independence of one of the two. Just as there is a mystical connection between Creation and the Creator. Creation cannot subsist without the Creator. The debate on matter and form broadly understood is also occurring in scientific and philosophical fields. Henri Poincaré for example similarly to Christian thought emphasised that science at the same time moves to complexity and variety but at the same time to simplicity and oneness [Poincaré, 1917, 202–203]. Similarly Poincaré believed, that mathematical thought cannot be independent of the mind. In theological terms a construction of an entity or form could mean its artificial projection and a construction of a substance, which however will always be purely subjective. Some forms of intuitive philosophy attempted to address these issues (N. Lossky, and others).

One of the ways how theology can safeguard a connection between what it signifies and what it states, is by understanding its methodology. One can never create a guarantee that as a theologian one is maintaining a link between substance and form, but one can create a methodology which leads to this.

What we mean here is what the Fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus meant as theological method. This method cannot be summarised in one paragraph, but we can state that it essentially means “listening” to God and his revelation and then understanding the essence, whereas in theology today we are doing the opposite dictating theology and expecting substance and matter to come along. Theology is not what God is saying but what the human is saying to God.

The dictate of particularism

Related to our theme is the relationship of the whole and particular. Again we can remind ourselves of Aristotle, who writes in his *Physics*: “Thus we must advance from universals to particulars; for it is a whole that is more knowable to sense-perception, and a universal is a kind of whole, comprehending many things within it, like parts” (Aristotle. *Physics*. Book 1, 184A-22/184b14)¹.

It is obvious, that the human being is incapable, of viewing reality in its totality, his or her viewing ability is always piecemeal, these are the limits of the human being. Otherwise the human being would be like God, who can view totality and particularity at the same time. But regardless of our intentions, we cannot subsist in the comfort of detail, we are called to live in a universe. Somehow, we are forced to be a judge of the total, since we must find our place in this universe. We are driven to be judges of the universe by referencing particular reality, to the whole reality, thereby risking that the whole becomes a meaningless particular element judged and destroyed by this myopic situation. History in this regard is also a form of theology because it has to classify events according to given dictates.

The limit of viewing things in a piecemeal way means essentially, the possibility that one overlooks the totality of things. One misses the bigger picture somehow. Yet looking at a small object means essentially referring it to the whole. Any part of creation has to be referred to creation as a whole to “make sense”. How can we do this in our limited capacity?

The fathers were very aware of the tension between particularity and wholeness. The classical notions of microcosm and macrocosm and their mutual interrelatedness do not need further comment. In this regard, the arrival of Jesus Christ, was a physical and spiritual affirmation of the cosmic unity of the particular with the whole, apart from many other things of course. Christ as the Fathers emphasised unified in a “scandalous” way that which we could not unify. The tension of totality and particularity of creation and creator has been resolved in Christ and was planned from the beginning.

In this context Gregory of Nazianzus writes: “We will begin thus. The Deity cannot be expressed in words. And this is proved to us, not only by argument, but by the wisest and most ancient of the Hebrews, so far as they have given us reason for conjecture. For

¹ In: [Aristotle, 1952, vol. 1, 257–355].

they appropriated certain characters to the honour of the Deity, and would not even allow the name of anything inferior to God to be written with the same letters as that of God, because to their minds it was improper that the Deity should even to that extent admit any of His creatures to share with Himself. How then could they have admitted that the invisible and separate Nature can be explained by divisible words? For neither has any one yet breathed the whole air, nor has any mind entirely comprehended, or speech exhaustively contained the Being of God. But we sketch Him by His Attributes, and so obtain a certain faint and feeble and partial idea concerning Him, and our best Theologian is he who has, not indeed discovered the whole, for our present chain does not allow our seeing the whole, but conceived of Him to a greater extent than another, and gathered in himself more of the Likeness of adumbration of the Truth, or whatever we may call it" (Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 30, 17)².

Gregory realises that one cannot grasp the whole, but this does not mean that he surrenders approaching the whole altogether. One can approach the Whole but in a different manner than limiting it by giving it names. As is exemplified in the Old Testament. It is a relationship of Likeness based on personal interaction. At the foundation of contemporary thought is an abstract belief that reality is indeed based on some substance. But at the same time there is a belief that any concrete or personal definition of this substance will lead to its destruction. So this is replaced with a cult of form. By emptying all forms and particulars of meaning, presumably one protects a supra-substantial humanistic cloud of some sort. On the contrary in Christianity or Old Testament Judaism, the apophaticism led to an affirmation of concrete personhood of God and not an affirmation of an empty abstraction.

This de-mythologisation in the name of the protection of an indefinite abstractness became a trend in theology in an indirect form also. Schillebeeckx correctly observed "A misunderstanding of this fact can, for example, be found in "existential interpretation of the bible", which postulated a schism between man's understanding of the world and his understanding of himself, claiming that the new testament understanding of the world is antiquated, but that its self-understanding is still valid. This, of course, resulted in the great programme of demythologisation, which was basically a separation of the self-understanding of the new testament from its antiquated understanding of the world. What was forgotten in this programme, however, was the fact that man can only really come to himself in the world, and that the image of the world and the image of man are so essentially connected with each other that, in changing the world, man also changes himself and thus acquires a new self-understanding" [Schillebeeckx, 1974, 67].

In terms of Christianity the "whole" was Incarnated, thereby offering a new substantive dialogue between the whole and the particular, through personhood. Christ the Word appeared, assumed our nature allowing us people a glimpse of the Incarnated God. The apostle offers us his well-known- optimism in 1 Cor 13: 12–13. "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood, So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." The love of God is not just a cheap human category for Paul. It is proven by its embodiment. Christ is the true unity of form and matter in the general sense of the meaning and this means that we, as part of this Creation, have a new promise of self-understanding of who we are. "I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." The understanding is not my understanding projected on to someone, but a projection of Him who understands me and enables me to understand myself and express this understanding. Christ is the guarantee that my form is not based on an illusion and projection.

For Paul faith is not a theoretical given but is linked to substance by virtue of being related to love a love brought about by God and the sacrifice brought forward by his Son. In other words, love is not automatic it has to be proven by sacrifice, which is offered by God himself. God not merely loves, he enacts this love by sacrificing himself. If faith is linked to love in this sense, it requires a sacrifice to be true faith and not just faith on a theoretical plane. In fact, Christ's sacrifice is an answer to the ancient conundrums already dealt with by

² Trans. by C. G. Browne, J. E. Swallow, in: [From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1984].

the Greeks of a seemingly disinterested God, who can show love but somehow this does not translate in alleviating the misfortunes of this world. For Greek mythology love is just a concept divorced from the substance of God, since in Greek thought God can change his attitude to the world and the human being according to emotional and anthropomorphic traits.

Christology in a sense, also moves the matter and form concepts to the level of person and substance relation. Just as we may generally ask about matter and form so we can analogously enquire about the relation between substance and personhood.

However, the contemporary divorce between what we may call substance, content, and form in human culture and history can also play a role in Christology if this is not properly understood. A tension between person and substance can be present in Christology. In some ways the popularity of personalist theology in Orthodox thought was due to the possibilities it offered for explaining the dynamics of substance and personhood.

The theologian Zizioulas as other proponents of this theology has re-assured us, that once you have a good personal relation, you have wonderful persons and perhaps also substances. Relationality however, as such, is not always a guarantee of true substance and personhood if not linked to action and movement. Human relationships or personal relationships do not automatically lead to the development of the person in its substantial dimension. Thus we can have a wonderful personal relationship without having a substantial relationship. Just as we can have millions of friends on the social nets, which bear all the marks of true empathy and sympathy but in reality this friendship is not of a substantial kind, because its substance lay only in form.

How can theology acquire substance?

Theological reflection cannot count on the holiness of theologians. Since not many are like Christ, it would be risky to state that theology can get its substance and form in perfect symphony. A theologian can never be sure whether his theology, that is *form* expresses the substance that is Gods word. Here the role of the Church is of paramount importance understood as a unity of God and man thereby “guaranteeing” the substance of theology.

The question is how to assure that theology given its limitations preserves the dynamic unity between what it says and what it is its substantive meaning. After all theologians are convinced that their particular theology is a perfect expression of substance. If we want to see a resemblance between substance/matter and form in theology one has to define how this comes about. For an Orthodox theologian the true presence of Christ in substantive form during the Eucharist is a guarantee that his or her theology is based on substance, since it relates to the essence of theology, the Incarnate reality.

Of course, the realisation of this fact is dependent on the theologian’s proximity to this reality in his or her personal dimension. The positive corrective in the Orthodox Church is the role of the Church itself, which is a guarantee of the validity of the theologians position as it is tested in the environment of the Church understood as a living organism of unity with God through the Incarnate reality.

However, todays theology is obviously often bad theology because its meaning and message is not reaching out to the substance-hearts of the people, because obviously it itself as theology has no substance. The effect is that once one receives only form and no substance, he or she gradually loses trust in theology to ever produce any substantial meaning. Theology is then replaced by a likeable humanism, which can be just as ineffective as theology in changing the hearts of people towards the better.

Theology as the Word of God has to effect change – a movement from form to substance and vice versa. This **change** is the greatest proof of the success of theology.

Already Old Testament theology understood that there is a danger of theology becoming flawed, if it becomes only form. Thus there was the fear of attributing to God a name or lets say form, which would not correspond to his substance and which would result in a lie or rupture between form and substance.

Similarly, many Fathers in relation to the theology of the Trinity struggled to explain how to explain the various names and designations of the divinity with the reality of its unity and oneness and incomprehensible substance. They sensed that once we start giving various “names” to the one essence of God the names begin to lose their meaning or at best begin to designate only one aspect of the truth thereby becoming “relative”. Relativity in terms of the form is a mark of its rupture with substance.

However, as Gregory Nazianzus importantly notes, if the theologian adopts a universalist position seeing the mark of God everywhere, this relativity is devoid of danger, because he or she cannot *be mistaken in theological expression since all reality however relative to the essence, bears the form of this essence in one way or the other. The task of the theologian is not to produce a pantheist belief but to discover God in all creation since creation is Gods work. The theologian can discover Gods presence through the Holy Spirit who is life and life of this creation. Gods commitment to his creation and its unity with Him is confirmed by the Incarnation.* This is why, theologians such as Maximus the Confessor emphasises his famous *Logoi* theology of the presence of Christ in all reality. This Christological universalism enables theology to always safeguard the link to its substance—Christ.

Gregory of Nazianzus observes: ...”there is one essence of God, and one nature, and one name (*klêsis*), even though the designations (*onomata*) are distinguished along with the distinct concepts (*epinoiais*), and whatever is properly (*kuriôs*) called by his name is God, and whatever he is in his nature (*kata phusin*) is a true name for him, granted that for us the truth lies in things (*pragmata*), not in words (*onomata*)” (Gregory of Nazianzus. Oration, 29, 13.17–22)³. Christ in this context did not offer names, he offered *pragmata* that is substance, because he was the Incarnate God. He did not offer ethics or morality only, but unity with God.

Even the non-Christian Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition realised the philosophical value in such concepts as unity, oneness of the divine principle, change, movement, ascent and descent. Its philosophy in this regard was also undoubtedly based on practical and substantial experience of reality. But the unity of God from the Christian perspective cannot be the result of “synthesis” if it is associated with the principle of strife (*archê tês machês*) and separation (*diastasis*) and dissolution (*Iussis*). God is not a product of synthesis in this meaning of the term. The theologian cannot arrive at an understanding of God and his oneness in terms of a synthesis which is also the mark of theology without substance. In certain respects a dynamic theology of movement can safeguard against this possibility. Forms do not become true or gain substance by virtue of synthesis.

Whether we like it or not, we all have to become theologians, because we are forced in our everyday lives to “classify”, to place things in their proper place and to give value to things and meaning. All the more so in the contemporary world. The difference between a machine or robot and the human being is that the human being not only classifies but also evaluates so that he or she can be happy and fulfilled. Evaluation and reflection corresponds to happiness.

Evaluation and reflection based on pure reason does not imply automatic relations between praxis and theory. Schillebeeckx observes: “The basic hermeneutic problem of theology, then, is not so much the question of the relationship between the past (scripture and tradition) and the present, but between theory and practice, and this relationship can no longer be solved idealistically, by a theory of Kantian pure reason from which consequences flow for the practical reason, but it will have to be shown how the theory appears in the praxis itself. How, for example, can religious freedom, as formulated by Vatican II, be deduced by purely theoretical exegesis from the church, s past? The church, s practice in the past at least contradicts this theory rather seriously” [Schillebeeckx, 1974, 66].

³ See: [Grégoire de Nazianze, 1978; The Five Theological Orations, 1899; Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning, 1991].

Role of Theology and contemplation

After these observations we can inquire as to what can help theology from descending into a system or form without substance if the theologian is not necessarily a Holy person or *staretz*.

As Gregory of Nazianzus shows, one of the answers lay in how theology is done. The method used in theology somehow relates to the kind of substance and content one ultimately finds in theology (Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration. 27.2)⁴. Unfortunately many students of Gregory of Nazianzus and other patristic writers do not focus on the theme of theological methodology. In fact, Gregory of Nazianzus at closer inspection is an author who is preoccupied with theological method. In any of his writings including the famous Funeral Oration on Basil (43) there are traces of how he understands theological method. All the more important is the witness of Gregory because he was no naïve fool and was living in a Church full of all the negative practical problems which remarkably resemble the same problems we face today. Unworthy priests, bishops, heresies etc. His methodology was practical not only theoretically based. Thus his main goal was not a lofty metaphysical ascent only but a theology, which broadly constructed, led to **piety**. Thus he saw the treasures in pagan culture because it did not if used sensibly preclude piety.

In the funeral oration on his brother Caesarius Gregory writes: “From geometry and astronomy, that branch of learning so dangerous for others, he selected what was useful, that is, from the harmony and order of heavenly bodies he learnt admiration for the Creator. Yet, what was harmful he avoided” (Gregory of Nazianzus, On his Brother St. Caesarius, 7)⁵. The obvious question one can ask is, “how do we select” what is good? Gregory has an answer, which can be generally summarised here. He continues: “He did not attribute all being and becoming to the motion of the stars, as do those who set up their fellow servant, creation, in opposition to their Creator. But he referred, as is reasonable, their motion, as all other things, to God” (Gregory of Nazianzus, On his Brother St. Caesarius, 7)⁶. God is everywhere the task of the theologian is to see the link between creation and the Creator. This is of course nothing new, but Gregory continues to emphasise that the way we are certain of this link is by discerning beauty and harmony, which practically leads to fulfilment and happiness. Theology must contemplate beauty. Beauty is something which can be contemplated by the mind. Gregory like many other Christian authors sees the mind as central to apprehending creation and the Divine.

For Gregory pagan culture or literature indeed knows beauty but the problem is that this is only in form because this beauty is not linked to its cause to the Creator. In ‘On Matters of Measure’ Gregory of Nazianzus explains why he writes poetry... “To see to it that strangers have no advantage over us in literature. For their sake I speak in highly – coloured language, even though beauty, for us, is in contemplation” (Gregory of Nazianzus. Carmina 2. I.39 “On Matters of Measure”)⁷. Here we hear the prime mark of Gregory, understanding of theological methodology – Contemplation. Contemplation is something that “everyone can do” since it is an acceptance of the beauty of reality, without us forming and determining it according to our own subjective disposition. The key is to let God speak and Creation speak and not induce creation to speak according to our own subjective selves.

To safeguard the totality of substance and form and reality Gregory moves the discussion away from the theologian expressing theology, but to the level of the theologian observing lets say “feeling” Creation and then pronouncing theology. The theologian is an active observer. This means that whether he or she is a saint or not, this does necessarily **negatively impact on the validity of his or her theology, since in a way it always touches on some aspect of truth. You always see only the good.**

⁴ See: [Gregoire de Nazianze, 1978].

⁵ Trans. by L. P. McCauley, in: [Funeral Orations, 1953].

⁶ Trans. by L. P. McCauley, in: [Funeral Orations, 1953].

⁷ See: (PG 37, 1333). Trans. by P. Gilbert, in: [On God and Man, 2001, 154]. See further: [Norris, 2006, 19–37]. See also: [Hadjittofi, Lefteratou, 2020].

A holistic and universalist understanding of theology in this sense implies the organic unity and interrelatedness of all our capabilities of sensing that which is around us. Regardless of modern psychology the fathers had already stipulated the interrelatedness of elements of the body and the soul, but more concretely of the souls components. The fathers linked such elements as emotion, cognition, feeling, etc., together and viewed them organically interrelated. Thus Gregory in Oration 28, 22 wonders about the various senses and their co-operation interrelatedness and organic harmony. All of this presumably contributes to the ability of the human person who can “feel” reality.

Gregory clearly realises that one “listens” with all his organs internal and external and this safeguards one from exploding into psychological destruction by emphasising one aspect of the human psyche at the expense of another. The human being cannot live in form or virtual reality for long, since this entails only the function of one bodily and spiritual organ at the expense of the other. Even on a basic elemental psychological level, it is obvious as many psychologists have discovered that one cannot separate emotion from cognition, thoughts from actions, impulses from conceptions. Recent advancements in psychology have shown the interconnectedness of various forms of communication and thinking.

We cannot separate one aspect of the bodily or spiritual function from the other. The insightful psychologist William James wrote: “If we fancy some strong emotion and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no “mind-stuff” out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains” [James, 1950]⁸. Life cannot be without emotion as its cognitive definition.

The theologian as an observer is a concept linked with the Holy Spirit. The theologian inbreaths and outbreaths. The notion of inbreathing and outbreathing symbolises life and is an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. In order to outbreath one must inbreath. The danger of emphasising form only is the same thing as outbreathing without breathing in first.

Theology of form without a substantial base is a mere outbreathing which runs the risk of being inauthentic if it is blown outside of its “substance”. If Christ for example, started to speak about theology to the masses without substantiating this theology by his embodiment of this theology, the theology could have been beautiful and nice but would be inauthentic “going to live a life of its own” and therefore being dead.

However, inbreathing and outbreathing is not a facet only in relation to creation. One has to be able to image the existence of God “without” His creation. God was “active” before the creation of the world. Thus Gregory of Nazianzus observes: “He who was ruling in the highest power over empty ages was active in contemplating his own splendour of beauty, one equal gleam of excellence expressed in the threefold light of the Godhead, as is manifest to that godhead alone and to those whose God he is” (Gregory of Nazianzus. Carm. I. I.4.63–66, “On the Universe”).⁹ According to Gregory God was contemplating his own being even before creation. Contemplation is a mode of being of God and the seemingly inactive is actually active. Here only love supersedes contemplation since the world is the product of love.

The task of theology according to Gregory is “But the scope of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His image, Gen 1:26, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or restore it, if ruined, to make Christ dwell in the heart Eph 3:17 by the Spirit: and, in short to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host.” Theology here can **only be positive**.

As we have seen, when Gregory speaks about theological method his notion of theology is closely linked with concepts of beauty and contemplation. Not surprisingly, it is impossible to associate beauty with other beauty in the sense of “differentiating the substantive aspect of beauty”. There is no hierarchy of beauty. A beautiful object cannot be simply classified

⁸ Cit. in: [Damasio, 1994, 129].

⁹ In: [Poemata Arcana, 1997, 18–21].

or compared with another beautiful object by a theory of “beauty”. Beauty does not allow classification at least in terms of relation to other beautiful objects or beings.

However, beauty allows one to understand without explanation. In order to see beauty around us it is not enough to classify and define, but we must **see it**, through contemplation. One chooses between what is good and bad by “seeing good everywhere”. By feeling and experiencing (like the apostle Paul). Contemplation is not a classification. Contemplation is an inbreathing.

Contemplation as a form of spiritual life is described in other authors such as Philo of Alexandria, who in this regard is very important, since he gives us a glimpse into the spiritual movements in the period of the New Testament. Philo states, that the Essenes practiced the active life, whereas the Therapeutae were associated with the contemplative life. These are according to Philo pursuing a work of “magnitude of virtue”.¹⁰ Even more so what is interesting in Philo is the fact, that when discussing the Therapeutae he criticises the pagan beliefs of gods, saying that it is ridiculous to believe in the life of matter or that gods can be mortal and immortal at the same time.

In many respects Philo's idea of contemplation is a “realistic” one, since it does not depend on some specific system of defined and limited spirituality and we might say it is contemplation in the patristic sense of the word. Philo further emphasises that human effort is needed in the relationship with God, and the vision of God (Philo. *Questions on Exodus*)¹¹. For Philo the moral disposition of the individual does not limit or control the vision of “divinity” available, one is simply “filled with a longing to see” the King (Philo. *De Opificio Mundi*)¹². This longing is the essential component of the interaction between the divine and human.

As we have seen Gregory offers an alternative theological method not determined by rational systems and moral or ethical systems. One can experience beauty and the divine through contemplation, without a rational system of inquiry. This contemplation guarantees a relationship between substance and form. Here there also a difference between prayer in the classical sense and contemplation. For Gregory prayer and contemplation are linked together, but contemplation as a method of “listening” is more able to express the task of the theologian. Prayer is dialogue, where theology is not needed.

As Christians, we must realise that we cannot easily attain the highest spiritual standards as monks and saints of our Church. The exegetical and theological possibilities offered to a saint, who embodies life in Christ and saintliness is unfortunately something inaccessible to us sinners. However, one can feel the Holy Spirit and God's grace by following a path of contemplative observation, since God by necessity is always present in everything and everywhere. This omnipresence of grace enlivened by the Holy Spirit is something always here and everywhere accessible to each and everyone according to his or her possibilities.

Gregory also speaks of movement within the context of contemplation. Movement and interaction are marks of authentic theology and contemplation. The divorce between substance and form that we are witnessing is something which results in static non/movement. Forms are not producing any substance, and thus even if we are surrounded by a constant movement of images, these are moving only in an “illusionary manner”. They are not moving to a substantive goal.

This is so since there can be only one movement, which has God as its centre. Other forms of movement are without a goal or direction. As the spiritual tradition shows the human being without God embarks on a directionless journey. In this regard the action of the Holy Spirit as the spirit of freedom has no concrete direction not in the sense of geographic ambiguity but because it lies in its essence to give life, which is by virtue indeterminate, but based on the concreteness of God's love.

¹⁰ Philo of Alexandria. *On the Contemplative Life, Or supplicants., The Fourth part concerning the Virtues*, I, 471. See: [Philo of Alexandria, 2021].

¹¹ See: [Philo of Alexandria, 1953, 251].

¹² See: [Philo of Alexandria, 1929, 69–71].

In Oration 28 Gregory Nazianzus mentions the apostle Paul and his rupture as something we cannot understand since we did not experience it. Here, Gregory speaks of the impossibility of understanding Gods essence which was confirmed by many figures of the Old Testament. Gods substance or essence is inaccessible since it is incomprehensible and never circumscribable. This means that our life of ecstasy will never cease to the degree that Gods essence will never be fully circumscribed. This does not however mean that God offers us only imperfect images of himself, but images which have a “real” grounding being based as they are in his loving relationship to us. The unapproachability of Gods essence on the contrary paradoxically offers us endless dimensions of the unity between substance and form.

Gregory speaks of a movement, which is natural to us and therefore enables us to experience things without necessarily having to understanding the essence of these in the broader perspective. Gregory observes... ”For if, he says, I leave everything else alone, and consider myself and the whole nature and constitution of man, and how are we mingled, and what is our movement, and how the mortal was compounded with the immortal, and how it is that I flow downwards, and yet am borne upwards, and how the soul is circumscribed; and how it give life and shares in feelings; and how the mind is at once circumscribed and unlimited, abiding in us and yet travelling over the Universe in swift motion and flow; how it is both received and imparted by word, and passes through air, and enters with all things; how it shares in sense, and enshrouds itself away from sense” (Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 28, 22)¹³. Here movement and the paradox of opposites is the feature of life, which brings us further into the mystery of Gods creation. Gregory generally, is a theologian of paradoxes and he loves to juxtapose opposites. This opposition creates a tension which for Gregory offers avenues for further reflection.

Contemplation is eternal and never ending as God is never ending and eternal. This is in fact the mode of the “Powers” surrounding God. As Gregory implies, the angels and the higher powers surround God in an eternal contemplative mood. The distance from God is so vast, that all are sinners. No one can really approach God fully in the technical sense of essence, but fully in terms of the fullness of God at any given moment and His self-offering in each thing. We are left with the position of awe. In Oration 23.2 he writes: This is the wish of our schoolmaster Gal 3:24, the law, of the prophets who intervened between Christ and the law, of Christ who is the fulfiller and end Hebr 12:2 of the spiritual law; of the emptied Godhead, Phil 2:7 of the assumed flesh, Hebr 2:14 of the novel union between God and man, one consisting of two, and both in one. This is why God was united to the flesh by means of the soul, and natures so separate were knit together by the affinity to each of the element which mediated between them: so all became one for the sake of all, and for the sake of one, our progenitor, the soul because of the soul which was disobedient, the flesh because of the flesh which co-operated with it and shared in its condemnation, Christ, Who was superior to, and beyond the reach of, sin, because of Adam, who became subject to sin.” It is Christ who saves us from this unbearable tension between Creation and God, which would otherwise crush us and we would never be able to unify substance and form.

Here the issue is not the existence of sin, but the simple inability to encompass God. Thus regardless of sin, one can “contemplate” the eternal God and therefore approach him. “Combining all things in one, solely with a view to the consent of the Creator of all things; Hymnners of the Majesty of the Godhead, eternally contemplating the Eternal Glory, not that God may thereby gain an increase of glory, for nothing can be added to that which is full-to Him, who supplies good to all outside Himself but that there may never be a cessation of blessings to these first natures after God” (Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 31)¹⁴.

Needless to say modern thought often draws on ancient notions which receive new names but essentially mean the same thing. For example, Bergson understanding of intuition draws much from a classical understanding of contemplation. Thus as Herzog summarises:

¹³ See: [From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1984].

¹⁴ See: [From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1984].

“Bergson’s intuition, unlike the popular usage of the term, involves a precise methodology. Rather than immobilizing and distilling from matter that which can be acted upon, intuition delves simultaneously inward to the depths of the self and outward, beyond the self, to grasp objects in their entirety, as they exist in duration... Unlike the intellect, which is oriented toward the interest that a being has in the objects it can act upon, intuition is driven by the inward-motion of instinct, a form of sympathy “that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely” [Herzog, 2000].

Conclusion

The Patristic tradition spoke of a defragmentation of the cosmos due to sin. Even Greek philosophers realised the necessity of the unity of the cosmic reality and some form of underlining movement. All this had theoretical and practical dimensions.

We have broadly used the concepts of matter/substance/content and form in a theological sense to underline a split between the essences of things understood as living truth and the outward manifestation of this through forms, which include communication, words and other means. This question is of special relevance today, when modern forms of communication, virtual reality have brought a renewed interest in the relationship between content, substance and form.

Theology has also succumbed to a tendency to lose its grounding or foundation, substance. Thus the phenomenon of faithless theologians the dominance of causality and rational categories have contributed to theology becoming a mere interesting humanist discipline devoid of content.

In this article we have suggested, that a way of avoiding this rupture of content and form in theology, is of course the traditional emphasis on praxis and theoria. However, theology cannot depend on an abundance of holy theologians who automatically have the ability to express both content/substance/matter and form. This does not mean that theology cannot be done at all.

In fact, Gregory of Nazianzus can be an inspiration for us here. He lived in a period where Christianity suffered moral setbacks and was similarly losing its content and truth because it did not do what it preached. Nazianzus realised that for theology to safeguard its integrity it needs to be done in a certain way, which would realistically but objectively not depend on the moral or spiritual state of the theologian.

Good methodology in theology can help to safeguard that theology is truly the word of God and therefore there is no rupture of substance and form. This can be done by contemplation understood as a process of “revelatory” listening to Gods words and seeing his deeds, which would ultimately lead to an appreciation of beauty. The theologian sees only positive and beautiful things around him, because he sees the Creators hand in them and this would not be dependent in any way on his or her moral or sinful situation. Listening to God means escaping system building and theory building which would be as usual ultimately devoid of content.

God does not reveal himself according to systems or rational logic. Listening to his word does not take of the burden of action from us, but does guarantee that what we listen to is the result of a unique unity between substance and form.

Today’s virtual realities and forms are moving images devoid of direction and content. Even theology has become a virtual science movable according to fleeting modes of the day. Theology has to rediscover its mystical dimension which is ultimately a dimension of The Holy Spirit and freedom implied meaning that one has the freedom to see beauty and life everywhere and therefore liberate reality, express it substantively, since it is the Creation of God and which is unified to God in a new manner through Christ.

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