

Knowing Through Unknowing: Unveiling the Reverse Perspective in Lossky's Apophatic Theology and Its Implications for Orthodox Epistemology

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ABSTRACT. The reverse perspective is a drawing technique of medieval Byzantine iconography, in which the viewer is the point of view of the object depicted in the icon and experiences various perspectives. There is no vanishing point, and the perspective lines do not overlap the mystical reality of the sacred art, but inversely, they start from the depths, ending with the onlooker standing before it. Such distortion of the realistic perspective is a subject of significant scholarly interest. However, theological analysis remains notably absent, leaving an extremely interesting area of study out of focus. Accordingly, this article delves into the theological concepts and implications of the reverse perspective, with a primary focus on Orthodox epistemology through the work of theologian Vladimir Lossky. It aims to demonstrate that the reverse perspective is not merely a stylistic choice but manifests profound theological meaning exploring its relevance for contemporary theological scholarship.

Keywords: Reverse Perspective, Byzantine iconography, Vladimir Lossky, Apophaticism, Epistemology

Introduction

The reverse perspective¹ is a drawing technique of medieval Byzantine iconography, in which the viewer is the point of view of the object depicted in

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¹ This is also known as the inverted perspective, inverse perspective, and Byzantine perspective. The term 'Reverse Perspective' or 'Inverted Perspective' (*die umgekehrte Perspektive*) was coined by art historian Oskar Wulff, see Clemena Antonova, "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective:' Definitions East and West," *Leonardo (Oxford)* 43, no. 5 (2010): 464-69. Although more extensive scholarly works on this topic belong to theologian, philosopher, and mathematician Fr. Pavel Florensky, see Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, edited by Nicoletta Misler and Wendy R. Salmond (London: Reaktion, 2000), 201-222.

the icon and experiences various perspectives. The photo-realistic spatial structures of the composition and classic rules of geometry are entirely ignored; thereby, medieval artists refuse the naturalistic representation of the transcendent realm. Unlike the linear perspective, which aims to imitate how objects appear smaller as they reduce the distance, the reverse perspective operates on a different set of visual principles. There is no horizontal space beyond the depicted figures; thus, the closed background blocks the linear perspective, expressing the ungraspable and impenetrable nature of the divine. Therefore, there is no vanishing point, and the prospective lines do not overlap the mystical reality of the sacred art, but inversely, they start from the depths, ending with the onlooker standing before it. However, in the linear perspective, depicted figures decrease with the increase of distance and create an illusion of depth.

Most academic papers on the inverted perspective pertain to its visual narrative styles, ethnocultural, geometric-composite, and religious-philosophical significance.² However, none of them analyses the theological significance of the medieval Byzantine iconographic technique, leaving the extremely interesting area of study out of focus. There are strong correlative conjunctions between Byzantine iconography and the theological tradition of the Orthodox Church. Accordingly, this article delves into the theological concepts and implications of the reverse perspective, with a primary focus on Orthodox epistemology through the work of theologian Vladimir Lossky. It aims to demonstrate that the reverse perspective is not merely a stylistic choice but manifests profound theological meanings.

In this theological exploration, Lossky can provide one of the most relevant methodologically functional systematic tools since the essential point, as well as the uniqueness of Russian theologian, lies in the relocation of perspective lines from physical to metaphysical dimension, stressing the fundamental inversion of the entire thought and perceptual system, which explicitly reveals the inverted dimension of his theological discourses. Through apophatic theology, Lossky offers a unique understanding of how to conceive Orthodox epistemology and, in general, the existential structure of creation from the reverse perspective. Accordingly, Lossky's apophaticism, i.e., *the inverted dynamism of metaphysics*, will be the guiding principle or *modus operandi* of this article.

² The inversion of perspective has been interpreted and critically reformulated by various authors. Some noteworthy studies in this regard are: André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Bollingen Series, 35 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Борис Раушенбах, *Пространственные построения в живописи: Очерк основных методов* (Москва: М.Наука, 1980); Boris Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse: De Ridder, 1976); Clemena Antonova and Martin Kemp, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God*, Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

Lossky's reception of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and patristic exegesis in the context of apophaticism can serve as a foundational framework for this article, providing insights into the ethos and a deeper understanding of the reverse perspective. In this regard, this research explores how the concept of theological inversion employs apophaticism as a key hermeneutical instrument to illustrate the reversal of Orthodox epistemology. Accordingly, the central method of this study involves identifying how Lossky rearticulates the Byzantine inverted perspective. To attain the primary objective, the systematic method of this research will outline one central aspect of the reverse perspective: the human being cannot control or objectify the divine. This aspect stresses the limited cognition of the creature, suggesting that positive attributes are merely metaphors for the transcendental realm, always carrying the risk of enclosing God within determined boundaries. Therefore, the spatial structure of Byzantine iconography symbolically manifests the inverted dynamism of the divine projection.

1. Apophatic Theology: The Inverted Perspective of God

Lossky's apophatic theology (negative theology, i.e., expresses understanding of God through negation, stating what God is not) can be considered one of the key theological instruments for understanding the reverse perspective in modern Orthodox theology. For Lossky, everything that the human being can express through cataphasis (positive theology, i.e., making positive assertions about God) vis-à-vis the divine does not reveal the substance of God but the attributes that describe the divine nature.³ Hence, there is always the risk of idolizing the divine since the true face of God is not on the icon but behind the icon. Therefore, Lossky's apophatic inquiry requires a perceptual shift, i.e., there is no mode of ascension or contemplation to master the divine, but only ecstasy and cognitive ignorance. In this fashion, the negative way of theologizing relocates perspective lines from the immanence to the transcendent reality and stresses the radical unknowability of God. As illustrated in Byzantine iconography, the divine projection from the apophatic perspective comes inversely from the Kingdom of God and penetrates into physical reality. Accordingly, Lossky draws a correlative bond between the iconography and the unknowable nature of the Godhead, where the anti-naturalistic spatial structure of the icon symbolizes the apophatic vision of God.⁴ However, while the paradigm of closed reality finds its legitimation in apophasis, the Incarnation of the Son as a climax of

³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1976), 36.

⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1974), 14.

theophany makes iconography and theology attainable.⁵ Yet, from the apophatic standpoint, God in the very essence remains hidden, and the perspective that starts from the creature is always surpassed by projection coming inversely from the Triune God.

Lossky's theological scheme can be illustrated as follows:

- (i) Cataphatic theology: the linear perspective from the human to God;
- (ii) apophatic theology: the inverted perspective from God to the human.

Lossky's intention to prominently place the *Corpus-Dionysiacum Areopagiticum* is quite clear. Accordingly, his entire theology emanates from an apophatic perspective that transforms gnoseological dilemmas into the supremacy of ontological reasoning. The limitation of the conscious mind that is succumbed to epistemic puzzles cannot construct the supernatural image of the Godhead. Instead, the only way to attain the divine is to deconstruct what is known vis-à-vis the unknowable.

1.1. The Human Person Cannot Control or Objectify the Divine

The negative way of theologizing can be regarded as one of the most paradoxical discourses of Eastern Orthodox tradition. In its very essence, apophasis embodies the metaphysical mystery of 'nothingness', the quest into the darkness where God dwells. However, it does not elude a denial of the divine or a mere sophistic abstraction but the negation of logic since there is an insurmountable abyss between immanence and transcendence. Nevertheless, these two distinct poles of existence can be brought closer through radical changes of perspective, which should be crowned by an ontological synergy with the divine.

Human perception is inherently constrained and limited when it comes to naming God since, as Lossky accentuates, if one perceives the divine, then what is perceived cannot truly be God but rather "something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him."⁶ Therefore, the divine is attainable *via* unknowing (ἄγνοωσία), which does not imply the denial of understanding God, but instead, according to Dionysius, it is a new mode of wisdom, which is a higher degree of knowledge than any form of science.⁷ Thus, negative theology begins with contemplation, but the dynamic progression of apophaticism is, at the same time, paradoxically regressive, i.e., the emptying of consciousness is necessary

⁵ Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 14.

⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 25.

⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-human Communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 17.

to be filled up with what comes inversely, i.e., the divine projection. Hence, regression is not spiritual but intellectual: the renunciation of theological imperatives that are a product of human reasoning, therefore, somehow unnatural. Consequently, in order to achieve the real state of the 'mystical contemplation' (μυστικά θεάματα) and genuine communion with God, who is entirely transcendent, one should ignore logic and reasoning.⁸ Therefore, spiritual progress toward the divine requires purification (κάθαρσις) of the mind.⁹ It is clear, for Lossky, that apophasis is not an intellectual quest to achieve God since spiritual dynamism into the divine darkness does not display only a κάθαρσις of mindset.¹⁰ However, at the same time, it implies the total ignorance of material reality, which is more of an existential quest, going beyond beingness as such and encompassing the human person in its totality.¹¹ Furthermore, theologian Sarah Coakley points out that by emphasizing the total unknowability of the divine, Lossky advances the notion that negative theology transcends not only logic but also all forms of negation, a concept she refers to as 'radical apophaticism'.¹² From this radical stance, Lossky endeavours to prevent philosophical speculation from apophatic theology and, simultaneously, to intensify the sense of self-denial and renunciation of all the intellectual instruments that a human person hitherto possesses before entering into the divine darkness.¹³

The 'Radical apophaticism' can be regarded as one of Lossky's most provocative approaches. Given that, the locus of his theology is the total unknowability of the divine, excluding all rational concepts that might lead to false images of God. In this vein, Lossky points out that the human person should not seek the tradition of the negative way of theologizing through a linear perspective 'on the horizontal lines', but in its more profound sense, "Tradition is Silence."¹⁴ Therefore, all theological manifestations are shrouded in apophatic darkness and bear inverted characteristics, i.e., true theology is God-given in

⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 27.

⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 27.

¹⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, transl. from the original Romanian by Archimandrite Jerome (Newville), a.o.; forew. by Alexander Golubov (South Canaan, PN: St. Tikhon's Religious Center, 2003), 234.

¹¹ Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 234.

¹² Sarah Coakley, "Eastern 'Mystical Theology' or Western 'Nouvelle Théologie'? On the Comparative Reception of Dionysius, the Areopagite in Lossky and de Lubac," in *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, edited by George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 129-132.

¹³ However, one cannot consider Lossky an anti-intellectualist since he highly valued the academic experience of Christian theology. Moreover, for Lossky, as is evident in his works, mysticism and intellectual reasoning do not exclude but complement each other.

¹⁴ Lossky, *Image and Likeness* 150.

silence. Indeed, for Lossky, theologizing commences by acknowledging that the mystery of God in its very nature is unknowable and incomprehensible. Only silence can speak about the divine. Here is the perfect manifestation of the paradoxical nature of apophaticism since it invokes the human person to hear the silence. Likewise, it operates inversely, i.e., the silence surrounds and overwhelms the creature and not *vice versa*. Thus, even though, according to Christian teaching, God became the flesh, the Incarnation is still a mystery.

For that very reason, Lossky considers the Incarnation an ‘incomprehensible paradox’ wherein God wholly commits Himself to creation and even undergoes death for the sake of humanity, all without diminishing His divinity.¹⁵ Therefore, he refuses to conceptualize even the physical manifestation of the divine since, although God appeared among human beings, divinity still remains an enigma, an unfathomable mystery that the human consciousness cannot objectify.

In the humanity of Christ,’ says Dionysius, ‘the Super-essential was manifested in human substance without ceasing to be hidden after this manifestation, or, to express myself after a more heavenly fashion, in this manifestation itself.¹⁶

The positive way of theologizing, for which the sacred humanity of the Incarnate Son is the object of contemplation, has the most intensive force of negations.¹⁷ For Lossky, two natures, divine and human, exist without fusion in the hypostasis of the only-Begotten Son; they are indivisible and inseparable and, at the same time, do not annihilate the difference between them.¹⁸ This union reveals the apophatic character of the Incarnation.¹⁹ That is because “the union of the two natures is expressed by four negative definitions: *ἀσυγχύτως*, *ἀτρέπτως*, *ἀδιαρέτως*, *αχωρίτως*.”²⁰ Suffer and death on the cross belongs to the humanity of Christ; and, at the same time, He has never ceased to rule the universe “in virtue of His Divinity which suffers no change.”²¹ Lossky always underscores that the quintessence of personhood, the supreme state of beingness, is self-purification and self-abandonment when the person is entirely receptive to the divine will. The Incarnate Son exemplifies the perfect model of the

¹⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1978), 91.

¹⁶ See ‘Epist. III’, P.G., III, 1069 B., quoted in Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 39.

¹⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 39-40.

¹⁸ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 143.

¹⁹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 143.

²⁰ (*ἀσυγχύτως* - unmixed, *ἀτρέπτως* - unbreakable, *ἀδιαρέτως* - indivisible, *αχωρίστως* - inseparable). See Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 143.

²¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 144.

inverted dynamism of personal ascension.²² It is the mystery of the self-emptiness of the divine person, the state of *kenosis* that equally serves the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of theology. However, it bears more apophatic qualities in a more profound sense since the state of *kenosis* transcends the capacity of the human mind to objectify or comprehend.

Therefore, for Lossky, theology is doomed to failure without apophatic awareness as long as intellectual endeavours to name God can become the cause of idolizing the divine. The idolized God is a dead God, static and one-dimensional, unmoving and fossilized in historicity. In contrast, the God of Christians is the living God, ubiquitous, timeless, and multi-dimensional, existing both within history as well as beyond history. This complexity renders God ultimately unknowable. Lossky makes it very clear that to see the divine through the positive attributes only is futile since, as set forth in the *Book of Kings*, God dwells in "sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:11-12). Certainly, apophaticism is a mystical silence; thus, for this very reason, Lossky's theological hero is Dionysius, who inverted the Christocentric attitude of the early Church and questioned the legitimation of human-created images of God. Indeed, that is a good start to entering into the quest of the divine mystery.

Such a quest has no alternative for Lossky. In its profundity, apophasis embodies an inverted mode of theologizing, wherein the darkness of unknowability signifies a total ignorance of the conscious mind, excluding active participation at all levels. To understand how apophaticism embodies *the inverted mode of metaphysics*, it is essential to examine how human perception operates within material reality. Perception can be conceptualized as arising from the encountering of two distinct points: one that comes from the external world and the other that belongs to the individual, including traditions, beliefs, and values that constitute a specific cultural domain. The human person receives sensory information and converts it through intellect, forming chaotic data as knowledge about something, for instance, God. While apophatic vision implies the entire deactivation of the conscious mind as such (which is an active agent in the process of perception) since the intellectual quest to define God is doomed to failure. There is no collision of two different points, only receptiveness to the divine projection. Thus, in the face of *the inverted mode of metaphysics*, the human person is inactive by reasoning but active by the heart; that is, the state of *metanoia* and *kenosis*.

In this regard, Lossky's theological discourse remains faithful to apophaticism, inasmuch as he endeavours to defend God from abstraction and excessive conceptualization. Theologian Andrew Louth accentuates that, to a great extent,

²² Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 144.

Lossky's mystical theology implies the 'inner transformation' of one's entire perspective through mind and heart, and it is an experience of another dimension.²³ It is a dimension of the divine realm, "the reality of the love of God, that binds the Trinity in Unity."²⁴ Thus, the *Theophilia*, the abundance of love in Godhead, is a primary cause of creation from the *Ex Nihilo*, crowned by the *kenotic* act of the Incarnate Son.²⁵ All in all, concludes Louth, for Lossky, the negative way of theologizing commences from the state of *μετάνοια*, requiring the internal conversion of the whole being.²⁶ Here, it is an important characteristic that differentiates Christianity from rational ideologies or logical concepts which intend to find the truth. They are a set of moral codes and laws, which is more a linear outlook, forasmuch as rules demand that humans act to achieve an ideological, so to say, utopian destination.

While mystical theology operates inversely, where God is unfathomable, and the hidden depth of truth is attainable only through self-purification and self-emptiness. That is why Lossky never speaks about sheer praxis but a mystical quest. Without transformation and receptiveness, praxis becomes a formal expression of the faith, and the human person falls captivated by ideological, formal regulations. Moreover, in Lossky's writings, one cannot see a sharp distinction between theology and mysticism, church and society, dogma and social life, but they are entangled and do not exist without one other. Thus, in its very essence, mysticism is not only the theological quest but something more: it is self-giveness and self-emptiness that inverts one's traditional perspectives and finds its fullness in apophysis. That is why Lossky's theology commences "in a kind of shock to, a paralyzing of, the intellect – not by propositions that offend the intellect, but by an encounter with what cannot be mastered."²⁷ Here is the epistemological issue: the 'paralyzed intellect' cannot master the divine since perspective comes inversely, representing revelation as a God-given gift for humanity. Consequently, the human person serves as a neutral agent open to receiving divine projection. Nevertheless, the mystical union is by no means the disappearance of a person but, through spiritual transfiguration, the fulfilment of personhood as such.²⁸

²³ Andrew Louth, "What Did Vladimir Lossky Mean by 'Mystical Theology'?" in *Mystical Theology and Contemporary Spiritual Practice: Renewing the Contemplative Tradition, Contemporary Theological Explorations in Christian Mysticism*, edited by Christopher C.H. Cook, Julianne McLean, and Peter Tyler (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 31.

²⁴ Louth, "Mystical Theology?" 31.

²⁵ Louth, "Mystical Theology," 31.

²⁶ Louth, "Mystical Theology," 31-32.

²⁷ Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. 3rd ed., The Great Theologians, edited by David F Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 579.

²⁸ Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 34.

However, speaking about the apophatic dynamism of the creature as a unique being seems vague since there are no clear notions in Lossky's theological quest about what the state 'beyond being' means in relation to the concept of personhood. Williams points out that, for Lossky, ecstasy is a subject of the personal act, a condition of self-forgetfulness.²⁹ Still, the question arises: how can one realize his/her personal existence if he/she renounces everything that has hitherto possessed, i.e., memory, self-awareness, relations, just to mention but a few. Or, what remains of one's personhood after penetrating into the divine darkness? What is evident is that Lossky makes a clear distinction between personhood and individuality; the former is what can be acquired, but the latter is what has to be fulfilled; therefore, as Papanikolaou accentuates, "One does not acquire a human person, one grows toward being a person."³⁰ Lossky is an apophatically motivated theologian, and he does not go into deeper existential layers of personalistic inquiry. He says that "the creature, who is both "physical" and "hypostatic" at the same time, is called to realize his unity of nature as well as his true personal diversity by going in grace beyond the individual limits."³¹ However, the phrase 'beyond the individual limits' does not have the same meaning as 'beyond beingness' since individuality is only one piece of the puzzle in the complicated structure of the human being.

Apophaticism calls creatures to depart beyond their existence in order to attain the highest degree of exaltation. Nevertheless, there is no precise indication of what Lossky implies when he speaks of the state of self-transcendence in relation to a human person. If this departure from oneself means 'growing toward being a person,' personhood is something superior; it is something one has to become. Thus, it is ambiguous how Lossky claims that spiritual dynamism toward divine-human union and deification is a personal act. If departure from oneself implies overcoming 'individual limits', it is by no means going from one's beingness as such. Therefore, the stress between negative theology and personhood remains unresolved. The state or condition of the human being at the supreme level of apophatic ecstasy is an open question in Lossky's theology. Moreover, as Papanikolaou points out, "the problem for Lossky is that he does not have the conceptual apparatus to link his theological notion of a person with his apophaticism, primarily because of the priority given to apophaticism in theological method."³²

²⁹ Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higon (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 13.

³⁰ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 57.

³¹ Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 122.

³² Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 92.

Lossky says that, unlike the accurate doctrine of divine hypostases, he has not found elaborate teaching on the concept of the human person in patristic theology.³³ However, what he has unique with regard to the concept of personhood is the exclusion of any sort of egocentrism and self-centred perspective - there is the combination of two existential modes of beingness, which starts with the realization of the need for self-transformation, i.e., *μετάνοια* and ends with the realization of absolute self-emptiness, i.e., *κένωσις* to reflect the inverted projection of the Triune God. Indeed, transformation is the point of departure of Lossky's theological quest. At the first stage, spiritual ascension requires a *kenotic* act (self-denial, self-renunciation), but at the highest stage, when one achieves the divine darkness, material efforts should stop their operation. Possibly for this very reason, Lossky does not enter into a conceptual, so to say, a philosophical quest about human personality. William points out that, for Lossky, theology "must be asceticism, even crucifixion," since the cross manifests the *Kenotic* insight of personalism, that is, the rejection of selfish 'individual will'.³⁴ However, in the face of the inaccessible essence of the Godhead and the projection that stems from the transcendence realm, the human person, in his/her corporeality, becomes reflective of the divine existence. Consequently, for Lossky, radical apophaticism is the foundation of all theological discourse.

Therefore, there is no mode of ascension or contemplation to master the divine, but the only way to attain unity with God is the state of ecstasy and ignorance when one departs from his/her own existence and totally belongs to God. At this state of beingness, one is not able to perceive any shape or conceptualize the divine; instead, the human person receives the 'deiform image' and reflects the likeness of the Godhead.³⁵ Consequently, the God-given gift, an icon of this supernatural projection, is the Incarnate Son, visible and, at the same time, hidden in his revelation.

1.2. The Inverted Epistemology: The Superposition of God

According to one of the fundamental principles of quantum physics, particles can be simultaneously in various locations and states, which is the mode of '*quantum superposition*' or so-called '*superposition principle*', i.e., there is not only the state of 'here' and 'there' but the entire constellation of the states and positions.³⁶ However, it is the case only if no measurement takes place,

³³ Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 112.

³⁴ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 14.

³⁵ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 211-212.

³⁶ John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21.

whereas if the observation is made, the particle becomes fixed only in one specific location, so observation/measurement breaks superposition, i.e., the state of ubiquitousness is 'collapsed'.³⁷ So, as it is seen, the observation collapses the superposition in a one-dimensional state and reduces it to the only mode of 'here' that is precisely not the authentic nature of the particle. Consequently, in the quantum world, there is no room for a radical binary perception, as in classic physics, in which, for instance, so-called digital logic uses only two numerals, 1s and 0s, where one is 'on' or 'true', and zero is 'off' or 'false'. Therefore, there is no dichotomy between the 'on' and 'off', but multiple states exist simultaneously.

These examples from quantum theory will help us to understand the fallacies and biased nature of the linear perspective more clearly. That is because the measurement from one's particular viewpoint changes reality; the truth (e.g., the position of the particle as well as naming the divine) through the observers' point of view is what one chooses, and the 'objectivity' of this perspective can be seen as a state of cognitive misconception. The misconception is the product of the conscious mind, which, as previously mentioned, is determined by culture, and consciousness is a kind of functional identifier that gives sensory information its meaning according to one's own socio-cultural experience. So, it is the empirical knowledge or data that governs and conditions how one observes and measures the world and how this measurement will be reflected in the conscious mind. Moreover, when we speak about the conscious mind, it cannot be seen apart from the culture, i.e., from a particular context. Thus, consciousness and culture are inseparable and mutually constitutive; that is to say, our cultural ground shapes us, or, as theologian John P. Manoussakis writes, "we simply are our past."³⁸ So, the hegemonizing of the particular context is the cause of perceptual errors, meaning giving priority to an individual point of perception. Nevertheless, we are always keen on defining God and consequently "collapsing" the divine in a certain position. However, it does not imply rejecting the contemplative essence of Christianity or denying cognitive phases of theologizing (i.e., getting into anti-intellectualism), but applying the above-mentioned quantum theory as an analogy in our theological discourse serves as a warning not to limit or collapse God to a particular context, but to acknowledge the divine multidimensionality, i.e., the divine superposition.

³⁷ Mark P Silverman, *Quantum Superposition: Counterintuitive Consequences of Coherence, Entanglement, and Interference*, 1st ed. 2008 (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2008), 26.

³⁸ John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology in the Eucharistic Tradition of the Eastern Church," *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 1 (2007): 30.

This is precisely the case with Lossky's theological discourses, which reveal another intriguing aspect: open epistemology. What makes his epistemology open toward the divine projection is his acknowledgement of the limited nature of human cognition. Lossky views the contemplation of God, as well as the divine-human communion, as an ontological state. That being the case, the only cognitive operation is to recognize the incomprehensibility of the realities that stand beyond the things that have already manifested. Images we depict as analogous to the divine, and the language we use to express the supernatural image of God are not identical to what we attempt to represent. To put it another way, the existential beingness of the things does not coincide with the images of the things themselves.

The dichotomy between the substance and the image or language it endeavours to manifest leads Lossky to give priority to ontology over epistemology since, for him, "all knowledge has one source - God."³⁹ God is the one who makes knowable what is hidden and unknowable, as well as animates what is static and amorphic. In this regard, Lossky firmly relates epistemology to the Incarnation event, i.e., the knowledge of the divine was made possible because God became flesh.⁴⁰ In this vein, he renders epistemological ontology into apophatic ontology, i.e., one is able to speak and express the divine (cataphasis) as far as God manifests him/herself through the energies, but *hyper-essence* remains unknowable (apophasis).⁴¹ Therefore, for Lossky, human beings are part of the gradual development of history, and therefore, the knowledge of God can develop only gradually.⁴² To conclude, for Lossky, the knowledge of God is a dynamic progression, where God stands as the primary agent who contemplates creation (which appears inverted from the human perspective). This emphasizes the active role of the divine in the epistemic relationship, in contrast to human attempts to comprehend the divine essence from a limited, anthropocentric viewpoint. Nevertheless, for Lossky, there is an indivisible link between ontology and epistemology;⁴³ however, not in the sense that existence is coupled with cognition and reasoning, but by relocating perspectives from immanence to transcendence, epistemology becomes a catharsis of the mind. Indeed, such a vision challenges the contemporary approach to epistemology⁴⁴ because the perspective is inverted; thus, the priority is given

³⁹ Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.

⁴⁰ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 44.

⁴¹ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 103.

⁴² Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 47.

⁴³ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.

⁴⁴ Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 105.

not to the centrality of human reasoning but to one's receptiveness and openness to knowledge, which finds its roots, not in logic, as modern and postmodern thinking emphasizes, but in the transcendental realm.

Lossky's epistemological scepticism leaves no room for hegemonizing one's religious perspective. One is no longer a central agent or predominant being over others but an equal being known by God and not *vice versa*. Thus, for Lossky, the limited nature of the conscious mind reveals that only the self-revelation of God can unveil knowledge about the divine,⁴⁵ and human *episteme* can only be the place where heavenly illumination can be reflected. This leads Lossky to see the human person as a *kenotic* being, reflecting divine self-emptiness. God's immanence, i.e., his/her revelation in the history of salvation, is always *kenotic*,⁴⁶ and it is the only perspective from which the Godhead, as well as the entire creation, can be contemplated. Consequently, he explicitly emphasizes the need for a shift from a self-centred to a self-giving perspective in order to experience the knowledge that comes, inversely, from the *eschata*.

The foundation of this self-giving dynamism of life is perfectly seen in Scripture. Christ offers Himself to all as a Paschal Lamb, and this sacrifice cannot be considered simply a heroic action, but it is a manifestation of the highest degree of divine love revealed through his self-giving life. This is the only impulse that should guide the human person to attain the loftier mysteries - without *kenotic* self-emptiness, there is no *theosis*. Thus, Lossky's insistence on the asceticism of the mind is a call to invert the entire mindset and conceive the world from the divine perspective, which, for us, implies perceptual inversion. So, according to him, when one's existential perspective becomes *kenotic*, one attains a true state of personhood, and this dynamic progression of *becoming* is substantial to conceiving the fundamental characteristic of Orthodox epistemology. Therefore, we should contend that Christian *kenotic* dynamism is not circular in the Platonic sense, i.e., to return the initial *archetype*, but it is what transforms the world into the new *earth* and new *heaven*. However, this metamorphosis is only possible if the linearity of the world is entirely reversed. Thus, the *inverted mode of metaphysics* manifests what Christian 'logic' implies in its more profound essence.

What is essential when speaking of the *kenotic* reflection is that Christ has not ceased to exist in the 'form of a slave', i.e., the divine self-denial was not a one-time act but is an ontologically constant *hypostatic* mode of beingness. Epistemologically speaking, the self-giveness of the Incarnate Son is one of the

⁴⁵ Arvin M. Gouw, "Transcendence and Immanence of the Trinity in Barth and Lossky," *Dialogo (Constanța)* 2, no. 2 (2015): 29.

⁴⁶ Gouw, "Transcendence and Immanence," 30.

essential perspectives of the scripture itself, which provides theological insight into exploring Christological presupposition and the whole narrative of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, *kenosis* can be considered as the fundamental tenet of how Christians should see the world. In this vein, when theologian Walter Kasper, in his remarkable book *Jesus the Christ*, deals with fundamental principles of Christology, he concludes that the self-giveness of Christ and his voluntary sacrifice is the very essence of the Incarnation and “the cross then can be interpreted only as the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of God.”⁴⁷ Therefore, if common sense rationality considers the cross as the end, or collapse and humiliation, contrary, in the light of divine perspective, it is a manifestation of God’s “power and therefore a new beginning.”⁴⁸ Respectively, we can spotlight that, from the linear perspective, the cross is the end, but from the inverted perspective, it is the beginning of the new world. Consequently, this existential insight is what gives birth to a new epistemological discourse, namely the inverted epistemology.

The concept of inverted epistemology allows us to conceive an existential structure of the world, as well as contemplate the perceptual perspective the New Testament reveals. Gospel starts with the call - “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven has come near - *ετανοεῖτε*, ἥγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν” (Matthew 3:2). The Greek word *Metanoia* (μετάνοια) denotes a change of mind, that is to say, it is a call for transformation, inversion of the conscious mind. Consequently, in the New Testament, the whole creation is undergoing a kind of metamorphosis: this is the new world where the entire array of value systems can only be perceived and understood from the inverted standpoint. Christ himself completely overturns the traditional linear worldview passed down from generation to generation and brings about the mental, ethical, and religious transformation of the world. Consequently, we can argue that the Gospel itself offers the inverted model of perceptual direction, where “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16). It is from this prism that Christ conveys the new covenant and even puts Himself in this mode of beingness through *kenosis*.

The inverted epistemology can be seen as a hermeneutical key for perceiving the whole structure of the Gospel as well as the entire history of salvation. It is Christ who opens up this existential horizon, shaping a unique paradigm of epistemology. In this fashion, we can argue that sermons and parables of Christ will seem paradoxical if one conceives them through the traditional or common-sense point of view. Jesus’ proclaimed beatitudes and other commandments refer to the opposite reality, or to put it differently, God

⁴⁷ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 156.

⁴⁸ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 138.

him/herself inverts the linearity of the human perceptual system. Thus, it can be considered a new language of communication or the entire constellation of grammar codes that constitutes a Christian way of seeing the world, as well as defines the attitude toward enemies, others, or even God and self. However, this epistemological paradigm requires a move beyond the limited scope of cultural/contextual perception. Consequently, it is impossible to grasp the essential meaning of Christianity without a complete transformation of consciousness, i.e., without inversion of mindset, and it is what the inverted epistemology, in its very essence, implies.

The insights into how inverted epistemology functions are best seen in literature. There are many examples, but we will focus on two of them. One of the greatest Spanish epic novels *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, depicts the image of the man Alonso Quijano who, in his imagination, becomes a knight, namely Don Quixote. He does not see the world from the linear perspective, that is to say, as it is 'naturally', but from the inverted viewpoint, i.e., in Don Quixote's vision, robbers are knights, prostitutes are noble women, and the oppressed and vulnerable are seen as mighty. Likewise, in the novel *Mysteries* by Knut Hamsun, the protagonist, Nagel, arrives back in his hometown and challenges the traditional worldview of inhabitants of the small town in Norway. He befriends the lowest class of society, people who are objects of mockery. These characters embody that type of person the reader can see in the novels by Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Ken Kesey, Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and William Faulkner, to mention but a few. All protagonists share one essential characteristic, in different forms, they experience the ascesis of mind, i.e., there is a shift from a self-centred to a self-giving perspective, and therefore, all have a unique (inverted) worldview from where they perceive the world.

The dramatic conflict arises when characters attempt to destroy the temple of collective thinking, domination, inequality, egocentrism, violence and restore it in the *kenotic* sense. As is the case in the Gospel, where scribes and Pharisees should be the holiest and most respected persons, but Christ says that prostitutes and the vulnerable are more likely to see God - "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31). Christ completely destroys this temple when washes the disciples' feet, those who see Jesus as king, but He inverts their vision and serves those who should be serving him - "Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). The mystery of the incarnation depicts the image of God as the servant, which is the highest expression of the divine love. Consequently, it is the inverted epistemology that

gives an essential insight into exploring the existential meaning of the message of Jesus Christ, expressed in self-emptiness and not in authority and domination.

What inverted epistemology endeavours to represent is the need to deconstruct the narrow perceptual system that is constructed by logic/linearity, or to put it differently, to demonstrate the necessity to proceed beyond binary logic in order to witness the divine in its state of superposition. That is because human perception always leaves room for biased interpretation since, as mentioned above, much depends on individual experience and cultural worldview, as well as on the collective consciousness, which is linear and binary, i.e., the attitude of one's vision stems from concrete empirical knowledge and common-sense rationality. Therefore, human beings are inclined to measure and judge creation based on their own understanding and give priority to the culture/context to which they belong. However, overcoming this limited horizon to conceive the holistic state of the world and the divine can only be attained through the metamorphosis of the way of thinking. For that very reason, the inverted epistemology requires the relinquishment of a self-centred outlook through self-emptiness and mind asceticism. Thus, one is no longer the central agent setting a value system and perceptual framework that prioritizes a particular point of view but instead becomes open to otherness and the unlimited varieties of creation. Consequently, the inverted epistemology reveals uniquely *kenotic* characteristics by offering an existential prism that refracts the linearity of human logic, reversing its direction from God to humans. Moreover, there is a paradigm shift, i.e., everything, visible or invisible, is seen from the perspective of so-called inverted logic. In this new reality, where the cross is, there is resurrection, and where is bodily defeat, there is a spiritual and mystical triumph. It is a transfigured worldview in which the cross, the scandalous and disgraceful instrument of punishment, and death become the most powerful symbol of eternal life.

Conclusion

At the end of the path of exploring the inverted characteristic of Orthodox epistemology, it is evident that apophatic theology explicitly reveals the inverted nature of Eastern Christian thinking. The relocation of perspective lines from immanence to transcendence is not a mere combination to shape conceptual language or sophistic abstraction, but instead, the way of negations is the essential force of Orthodoxy, forming the new mode of perception where the intellectual progression from immanence is interrupted by the inverted dynamism of the divine projection. Therefore, Lossky's theology is not only about the tension

between the two contradictory poles naming and not naming the divine, but witnessing and experiencing what comes inversely from the Kingdom of God.

However, Lossky's radical apophatic approach has its fallacies that, to some degree, limit the theological scope. In this regard, two main issues will be fair to mention. First, there is difficulty in imitating the ineffable and unknowable God. Since apophasis implies departing from beingness and stresses the absolute transcendence of the divine, the concept of the *Imitatio Dei*, therefore, becomes elusive. The negative way of theologizing excludes the intelligible involvement of the human person. Consequently, the relationship between Creator and creature becomes one-sided. Second, the lack of attention to personalist theory seems problematic from a modern perspective. The personalistic paradigm as the supreme value of contemporary times loses its weight in apophasis since the negative way of theologizing (i) implies the departure from existence as such; (ii) personhood is seen not as a stable/static form of beingness but as something that should be fulfilled through the apophatic dynamism. The former is somewhat ambiguous since Lossky does not go into detail to explain from the theological perspective what happens to the person when one enters into the divine mystery/darkness. When speaking about the dynamic progression of personhood, the latter excludes its significance as one's perfect state to perceive and measure truth, which is the basic principle of the modern era. Indeed, personalism is not only one of the qualities of the human being, but in its profound sense, it is an existential condition of beingness; thus, it should be understood as the primary imprint of one's own existence.

However, Lossky is not the type of thinker who attempts to reconcile theological truth with modern challenges. Instead, his aim is to deconstruct intellectual expressions of the divine that evolve over time, emphasizing the need to explore what lies beyond superficial theological concepts. In terms of religious formalism, Lossky accurately avoids it by positioning God outside the subject-object dichotomy, where only a human is an object of divine observation. In this vein, the inverted nature of apophasis, as a theological paradigm forming a new language of communication of Eastern Christianity, and this metamorphosis of the reverse perspective is most clearly seen in Byzantine iconography, where prospective lines come from the depth of the icon or, to say in Lossky's terminology, from the 'supra-essential' realm and penetrate into the material reality. For that very reason, apophatic dynamism requires a fundamental shift: the inversion of the entire perceptual system, which is the so-called inverted logic driving Orthodox theology from a self-enclosed (linear) to an open (inverted) epistemology.

The uniqueness of such theological discourse lies in transcending the cognitive process of theologizing, or, so to say, overcoming religious clichés, and becoming a witness to the ontological dimension of Christian thinking, which implies the liberation of oneself from the cycle of ideologized principles. Christianity is non-conformity. However, it does not allude to anarchy or revolution in a social sense, but it is a rebellion against the illusory, one-sided perception that always bears the risk of turning into authoritarianism or ideological (religious) tyranny. On the contrary, the inversion of theological perspectives offers a different conceptual apparatus that excludes giving a dominant position to any single context or ideology and provides a robust theological basis for critical examination. It stresses the constraint and subjective nature of human cognition and, therefore, challenges epistemological superiority. In this unique hermeneutical framework, primacy is given to the openness and receptiveness of the human person over a narrow perceptual system, thereby preventing the manipulation of theology as an ideology. Therefore, The inverted epistemology as a theological framework emphasizes that the idea serves the person, but ideology employs it and shapes the illusion of faith.

Consequently, the inverted perspective can be considered a hermeneutical framework that finds its applicability in contemporary theology, which is often utilized as a political tool. It can become an up-to-date instrument forming a conceptual apparatus through which one can transcend contextual/cultural prism and witness the divine superposition. In this respect, Orthodox theology can shape contemporary discourse through the reverse perspective and put Christian non-conformity at the service of modern humans.

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