

THE UNKNOWN GOD AND HIS THEOPHANIES: EXODUS AND GREGORY OF NYSSA

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Abstract. The analysis, which aims at the interpretation of the three theophanies from Exodus presents – from the metaphysical and epistemological points of view – three fundamental ideas. First, the idea of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God; second, the idea of the real difference between essence and energies in God's Being; and third, the idea of the real difference between the one essence, three persons (hypostases) and many uncreated divine energies (the powers or names) of God. One must say that the absolute unknowability of the essence of God means that God is forever the unknown God.

INTRODUCTION

Christian philosophy is based on two inseparable foundations. The first is the Divine Revelation, or the *books* of the Holy Bible. The second is Tradition. Tradition means all that does not belong to the Holy Bible. To the Greek Fathers of the Church, and to the whole world of Greek culture, this foundation was the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Old Testament. To the Latin Fathers of the Church this foundation was also the Greek translation of the Bible (in the early period of the existence of Christianity) and the Latin translation of the Old and New Testaments made by Jerome (*in a later period*). The Divine Revelation has the same validity for philosophy and theology. Tradition does not have the *inspired* character that the Bible has; it is a tradition based on the teaching of the Apostles, the Christian church and holy councils. When Divine Revelation met Greek philosophy, it gave rise to new philosophical currents, which, together with the fulfillment of the Old Testament *prophecies*, became transformed into

¹ The English version was improved by dr Joel Burnell.

Christian philosophy. This meeting gave rise to a new theology which was different than ancient Greek theology.

The Bible contains two fundamental truths. The first is that God is the only God, who created heaven and earth. And since 'heaven and earth' means 'everything', God created everything. If God created everything, then He also created the truth and the principle of contradiction. Truth is created, which means that God is above truth and above the principle of contradiction. Ancient Greek philosophy *held a different position*: the truth was eternal and everything was subject to the principle of contradiction. And although the philosophical terminology is Greek, the standard for the acceptance of this terminology is the Divine Revelation. The second truth of the Divine Revelation is that God is the unknown God. He is unknown, however, not only because the human mind is corruptible, but also because of the very nature of the Divine Being. God is the unknown God because His essence is unknowability. Yet this unknown God has revealed Himself in many theophanies, in the words He spoke to the people and, finally, in His Holy Word – Jesus Christ. And this is the paradox of the Bible – the foundation for the teachings of Christian Greeks.

In 1336 Pope Benedictine XII published the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* which specified the teaching of the Roman Church on God and the possibility of discovering the truth about Him. He published this document 300 years after the separation between the Byzantine and Roman Churches, and, hence, between the Greek and Latin theologies. The Constitution stated that it is possible to know God face to face and to know the essence of God – that the „*visio intuitiva et facialis divinae essentiae*” is possible. Pope Benedictine the XII said that (1) it is possible to know God, (2) it is possible to know Him by intuition, and (3) it is possible to know the essence of God. Although Greek theologians were able to accept the first and the second of these statements, the third, – in the version which they found in the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* – has been unacceptable to them, since their claim is that man cannot know the essence of God. The Apostle John, an able theologian, said: „No man hath seen God at any time” (J, 1.18).

The problem of the unknowability of the essence of God is fundamental to the philosophy and theology of Greek Christianity. When Pope Benedictine the XII published the Constitutio *Benedictus Deus*, Gregory Palamas, the great moral leader of the Greek monks from Athos, having analysed fragments from the Bible, announced that God would forever remain unknown. This is the metaphysical thesis of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God. God is, but nobody will ever know who He is.

The problem of the unknowability of God's essence can be found in Exodus, the second book of the Bible, especially in the descriptions of three theophanies in which God reveals Himself to Moses and Israel. The first theophany is the Burning Bush or Unburning Fire. The second is the Dark Cloud, also called the Shining Darkness, which Moses enters to meet God and receive the Ten Commandments. The third takes place when Moses sees the back (Cf. Ex, 33.23) of God; seeing the back of God means knowing the Unknown. These fragments from Exodus were interpreted many times by Christian Church Fathers, and many other Christian philosophers and theologians. They wrote commentaries, sermons, letters, as well as exegetical and philosophical treatises. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, a great Christian philosopher, theologian and mystic of early Christianity, undertook the attempt to explain the theophanies from Exodus. He wrote the treatise *De vita Moysis*, the allegorical biography of Moses, the founder of the Judaic religion. The book contains two parts. In the first – *Historia* – Gregory describes the history of Moses' life based on Exodus; in the second – *Theoria* – Gregory explains Moses' life allegorically. The central issue of his book is the analysis of the three theophanies.

This paper will not be a reproduction, summary or interpretation of Gregory's treatise. It will be an attempt at a philosophical look at the three theophanies from Exodus made by a person who considers himself a follower of Gregory and his philosophy. The paper will be constructed in the following way: (1) the presentation of the fragment from Exodus, (2) a short explanatory commentary, (3) a discussion of an excerpt from Gregory's commentary and (4) a commentary from the point of view of contemporary Christian philosophy. This paper will be an introduction to an intended future analysis of the problem of the unknowability of God's essence in the Bible and Christian philosophy.

The structure of the Biblical Book of Exodus is built upon the three revelations of God to Moses and Israel. According to Anthony Meredith the same structure can be found in the patristic commentaries and treatises which analyzed the „metaphysics” of Exodus (cf. Meredith 1978, p. 142-143). Exodus presents the history of Israel's departure from Egypt and journey to Canaan, the Promised Land. After the Covenant of the „Rainbow” with Noah, and the Covenant of „Circumcision” with Abraham, God establishes a new covenant – the Covenant of the „Law”. First, however, God wants to reveal Himself to His people, and so he reveals Himself to Moses and then to the whole of Israel, and gives them His Law – the Ten Commandments. The consequence of these three theophanies is the truth

that for any created being God is the unknown God in His essence. For Christian philosophers this consequence is the starting point of the philosophical analysis of the Divinity.

THE UNBURNING FIRE

God begins His revelation with the solitary meeting with Moses. Two conditions are fundamental here. First, it is God who wants to meet Moses. He selects the time and place. Second, one must be obedient to God and fulfill God's will. If human beings fulfill these conditions, then a meeting between God and them will be possible. The meeting is the gift of God's Love.

The solitary meeting between God and Moses takes place in the desert close to Mount Horeb. Many people, before and after Moses, lived in the desert, pastured their lambs and saw burning bushes, but no one had ever seen a burning bush that was not consumed by fire. The burning bushes which they saw were burnt up and turned into ash. But this burning bush was not a mere physical phenomenon. The bush was burning with real fire, but remained alive. Moses wanted to see this supernatural phenomenon. Where was this rare bush?

Moses had to go far away into the heart of the desert – he had to enter into solitude. The bush grew in the middle of the desert at the foot of Mount Horeb. Moses had to leave human habitations and go to the place of the meeting alone. He is now standing on Holy Ground, on land which is sanctified by the presence of God and talking to God. But what does Moses see?

Moses looks into the fire in which God is present. He looks into the light but he remains in darkness. His eyes are not prepared to see the light. Moses can see the fire but he does not see the Person who is talking to him and who is inside the fire, because God forbids him to approach. God reveals two truths to Moses: (1) the land which Moses is standing on is sanctified by the presence of God (it is not sacred by itself) and it is forbidden to enter there and (2) the One who is talking to him is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In my opinion there are two reasons why it was forbidden to enter that land. First, Moses had to purify himself. Only after such preparation, would he be worthy to see God. Second, Moses cannot enter the holy land because no man had ever seen God. The second reason proposed here is characteristic of Divinity. When Moses hears the voice of God he covers his face. Moses, who sees the Burning Bush and the Unburning Fire, can

see the Power and Glory of God (not God Himself), and can hear His voice but cannot see God Himself.

Gregory of Nyssa, in his *De vita Moysis*, analyses the problem of the inability to know God Himself and comments on the true vision of God. In the second part of his book he writes: „This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.163). Later he adds: „The munificence of God assented to the fulfillment of his desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.232). But what was the goal of God’s revelation to Moses in the Unburning Fire?

The first goal was the revelation of the truth about God, while the second was the selection of Moses as the prophet of God and moral leader of Israel. Moses will first lead the people of God out of their slavery in Egypt, and then lead the liberated Israelites into Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses will announce to Israel the truth about God, about the God of Israel. What was this truth? God is – this is the only truth revealed to Moses. God is, but God is not this or that. In Exodus God says: „I am Who I am” – God does not say that He is *a being*, but rather that He *is*. The first and the only name of God is: *I am* – Jahweh.

The God who revealed Himself to Moses fulfilled the promise which was given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He revealed His omnipotence, charity, perfection but never called Himself by His first name. Moses was the first human being who heard the name of God – Jahweh, I am. God said it in the first person singular (I am) but the Jews speak about Him in the third person (He is). It can be said, that this revelation was incomplete. Moses looked for another truth. God revealed to Moses that the only truth which He can (or chooses to) announce to Israel is the truth that GOD IS. For human beings this truth is sufficient. Israel must know that GOD IS and that they must pray to Him. From the philosophical point of view there is no identification between the essence and the existence of God; there is no supposition that God is a being, a real being, or a real existing being. God says: I am (not ‘I am a being’, or something else). This is the only revealed truth and other truths (e.g. the essence of God, Divinity) are still hidden. And it is true that they will be hidden forever, because – as John the Evangelist says – „no man hath seen God at any time” (J, 1.18).

On a few initial pages of the second part of his *De vita Moysis*, Gregory of Nyssa writes about the light to which man is bound. He analyses the situation of Moses, who stands on holy ground without his sandals and looks into the light of the Unburning Fire. "That light" – says Gregory – "teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself. The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing" (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.22). Gregory of Nyssa calls our attention here to the literal and allegorical sense of the theophany of the Unburning Fire. Moses, who stands in front of God, symbolizes the human soul, which aims at union with the Creator. The Bible teaches him what one should do to be united with God (to know God). This moment is analysed by W. Völker, who interpreted the theophany of the Unburning Fire as the turn to the inside, into the heart of the soul, which is the first step in the process of unification of man (soul) and God (cf. Völker 1955, p.193; Böhm 1966, p.247). But Gregory supplements the statement above, when he writes: „It seems to me that at the time the great Moses was instructed through the theophany, he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsist, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists" (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.24). Only God can say I AM. All things are if God IS. But Moses learned another truth (which will be underlined in the third theophany), that knowing God means that the human knower knows that God is the unknown God. If God is the unknown God and reveals Himself in theophanies, there must be – this is the philosophical consequence – a difference between the essence of God (which is unknown) and what is known thanks to the theophanies. Philosophy calls this the energy of God. Gregory of Nyssa analyses this problem in his philosophical and theological treatises. This difference will be recognized as a rightful element of the orthodox faith thanks to Gregory Palamas, the great theologian and mystic thinker of the 14th century.

Thomas Böhm, in his book on the interminable climbing to God, notices the fundamental role of this exegetic-philosophical treatise of Gregory of Nyssa to the whole future philosophical activity of the Cappadocian Father. Many points of inspiration can be found there. In the analysis of the first theophany one can find all the central ideas of Gregory's conception of

language, participation, description of God and interpretation of the Bible. Gregory's analysis of truth concentrates on humanity, and to this analysis he applies philosophical intuition and allegorical exegesis of the entire biblical history of humanity (cf. Böhm 1966, p. 247). Those who begin climbing towards the Truth will never end their climb. Their souls will never be satisfied – and this means that knowing God is impossible.

The first theophany, the Unburning Fire, is only an introduction to the symphony which will be heard later. The events which follow are more important than this story (but not than this theophany!): the departure of Israel from its slavery in Egypt, the mighty and important signs of God in the desert, the conferment of the Law and taking possession of Canaan (the Promised Land). But first, Moses had to say YES to God. This YES was the only way leading to the next two theophanies – the Shining Darkness and Knowing the Unknown.

SHINING DARKNESS

Israel, led by Moses, departed from Egypt and traveled to the Promised Land. They crossed the Red Sea, ate the quails and manna in the desert, drank water from the rock, and defeated their enemies. They reached the second Mount in the life of Moses and in their own history – Mount Sinai where the second theophany of the God of Israel takes place. This theophany will be called the Shining Darkness (Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the Luminous Darkness). The structure of this theophany is threefold. Firstly, God announces His meeting with Moses, secondly, He reveals Himself to the whole of Israel on Mount Sinai where Moses receives the Ten Commandments and finally, Moses enters the dark cloud as God wants him to.

God announces the meeting with Moses, which is supposed to concern Israel. He wants to show that He is the Lord and the only God. In the announcement about the meeting it is emphasized that: (1) It is God who wants to meet Moses, (2) It is God who selects the time and place, (3) God is an absolute, transcendent being and (4) God is the unknown being. God comes in the dark cloud, which means it is impenetrable for human beings (i.e. their senses and minds). In the dark, also means that the cloud covers the essence and uncovers the existence of God; hence, it refers to the mystic night of unification. For many unprepared individuals this cloud will be an ordinary cloud. For those who are prepared, however, this cloud will be the beginning of mystic climbing into the darkness, into the shining darkness, into the darkness which shines with true light.

The people who are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai see a dark cloud, smog, fire, hear thunder and the loud voice of the trumpet that announces the arrival of God. What their human senses perceive are the Divine Energies in which God reveals Himself to His people. Israel is trembling with fear because of the spectacular nature of what they can see. They have seen many signs of God, but they have never before seen a theophany such as this. They are afraid because they cannot see God, they cannot see God who talks to Moses. They cannot see because they must not see – this is God's order. They must not cross the boundary which separates the Holy Mount from the human earth. They can only hear the trumpet. But what is this trumpet?

Gregory of Nyssa, in his interpretation of this theophany, underlines his own epistemological position. „For it seems to me that in another sense the heavenly trumpet becomes a teacher to the one ascending as he makes his way to what is not made with hands. For the wonderful harmony of the heavens proclaims the wisdom which shines forth in the creation and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen, in keeping with the statement, *the heavens declare the glory of God*. It becomes the loud sounding trumpet of clear and melodious teaching, as one of the Prophets says, *The heavens trumpeted from above*. When he who has been purified and is sharp of hearing in his heart hears this sound (I am speaking of the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of reality), he is led by it to the place where his intelligence lets him slip in where God is. This is called *darkness* by the Scripture, which signifies, as I said, the unknown and unseen. When he arrives there, he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.168-169).

The God who reveals Himself in His energies is still unknown in His essence. And although He sends a guide – the loud-sounding trumpet – only a few people will follow its voice; few, because only a few receive God's grace – the grace of meeting God. The boundary which is traced by Moses is the boundary between the world and the dark cloud. When one crosses this boundary, one will be inside the shining dark cloud, but only Moses crosses it. However, there is a second boundary. Inside the dark cloud, it separates the light and the rest of the cloud. This boundary will never be crossed. One can enter the cloud, can be embraced by the rays of the light, but never enter the inside of the light. The human mind and senses stay outside the first boundary; intuition and mystic unification stay outside the second one. Inside the light there is God – God lives inside the light (God

is the Light). If one cannot enter the light than one cannot know God in His essence. But what happens inside the dark cloud?

Exodus says that Moses enters the dark cloud twice. When he receives the Ten Commandments he approaches the dark cloud. Moses enters the dark cloud because he hears God's command. And Moses sees the glory of the God of Israel.

A few select people can cross the boundary between the camp of Israel and Mount Sinai. They can climb Mount Sinai, but they can see God only from a distance and can only prostrate themselves before Him. This is the only time they can see God. God is the unknown God so there are no „better” or „worse” sightings of God, since what one can see is the glory of God, God's energies – this is what God gives to human beings. Hence what Israel saw on Mount Sinai was not God Himself but His Energies. Exodus talks about ascending Mount Sinai, but not about entering the cloud. Moses is the only man who can enter the dark cloud. After six days of preparation, Moses enters the cloud and talks to God. The Bible emphasizes that God was inside the cloud. It is clear that God *was inside* the cloud but *was not* the cloud. There is the same difference between God and the cloud as between essence and energies (as the difference between the sun and its rays and warmth). We must remember, however, that the entry into the cloud can be interpreted allegorically.

Gregory of Nyssa analyses the entry into the dark cloud. He comments on the knowing of God and collates this with the theophany of the Unburning Fire. Gregory reflects upon the Shining Darkness and underlines the unknowability of the essence of God. „What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. Let us not think this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progress and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the

seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.162-163).

No created intellect can attain the knowledge of God. Speaking more precisely: no created intellect can attain to knowledge of the *essence* of God. The Byzantine Fathers, speaking on the unknowability of the essence of God, always stress this point; the essence of God was unknown, is unknown and will remain unknown. This is the metaphysical thesis of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God. Gregory of Nyssa, who analyses the concept of darkness, underlines the antinomian language of Exodus: one knows the unknown, one enters the darkness which is the light. Gregory says that God Lives inside the darkness which means that He is unknown. If for Philo darkness symbolizes the existence of God, who is above human concepts and propositions and is approached by intuition, than for Gregory of Nyssa darkness symbolizes the absolute inaccessibility of God. And even though Gregory speaks of the ascent to God, he never speaks of the *extasis* (cf. von Ivánka 1959, p. 350-358). Thomas Böhm, in his commentary to Gregory’s *De vita Moysis*, says that for Gregory of Nyssa, like for the author of Exodus, seeing becomes unseeing. Gregory of Nyssa expresses the fundamental aspect of this darkness: the impossibility of discovering God or of seeing Him (cf. Böhm 1966, p. 252). This means that an attempt to discover God in the darkness has no sense, because God cannot be found there, due to the nature of the darkness itself. The absolute unknowability is darkness, or darkness is the absolute unknowability.

KNOWING THE UNKNOWN

Moses, who is inside the dark cloud on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, receives the plans of the Tabernacle for the Name of God and the Tablets of Commandments. The covenant between God and Israel is confirmed, but this is the first time that Israel receives a visible sign of the covenant – the stone plates with the Law written by God Himself. However Israel does not want to wait long. They instigate a rebellion and prostrate themselves before the golden calf. God is extremely angry. He wants to destroy His people and select a different one. Moses stands up for the people and God postpones the punishment. Moses breaks the stone plates

and punishes the people of Israel. God, however, wants to give Israel new stone plates of the Law. The third theophany is a request for permission to ascend Mount Sinai and receive the grace of seeing God once again.

From a philosophical point of view, the description of the third revelation of God to Moses is fundamental. It supplements the first and second theophanies, and underlines two philosophical truths: the unknowability of the essence of God and the knowability of His energies. Moses asks God for the grace to see Him, not Himself however, but His glory. He knows that he cannot see Jahweh Himself. He wants to see the Glory of Jahweh. He saw the glory in the Unburning Fire and in the Shining Darkness, but now he wants to see the most perfect indication of the essence of God (the sign but not the essence). God answers the request of Moses, and stresses that he can see the glory of the God of Israel but he cannot see the face of Jahweh. Face, I believe, means the essence of God, God Himself. God Himself is inaccessible for human understanding. Anthony Meredith says: „The third stage also takes place in darkness and is related to the passage in «Exodus» 33, 20, where in response to the prayer of Moses that he be allowed to see the face of God he is told to be content with the «backparts of God» but «my face you shall not see». By this means we are taught that the divine is in its innermost reality infinite, not simply in virtue of the frailty of the human intelligence. This is also a revelation «in darkness»” (Meredith 1990, p. 143).

Moses prostrates himself before God but he does not see God Himself. He can only see the Glory of Jahweh which passes by. The Hebrews think with the heart. „To know” God means „to recognize” God by the act of adoration which involves the entire human nature. One can make a philosophical interpretation of this theophany, but Gregory of Nyssa makes an allegorical exposition of the biblical description of the third meeting between God and Moses.

„Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul, which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype. And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face. The divine voice granted what was requested in what was denied, showing in a few words an immeasurable depth of thought. The munificence of God assented to the fulfillment of this desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire. He would

not have shown himself to his servant if the sight were such as to bring the desire of the beholder to an end, since the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.231-233).

To know God in his essence is impossible for two reasons. First, God is inaccessible for the human mind because of His own nature. And nature is, by definition, that which is always the same and cannot be any other. Second, the human soul, which can know God, cannot stop desiring Him. If the soul gets to know God then it will stop desiring Him – this, however, is impossible. To desire God is the nature (*essence*) of the human soul. Gregory of Nyssa underlines this in his *De vita Moysis*: „Therefore, he who encloses the Divine by any boundary makes out that the Good is ruled over by its opposite. But that is out of the question. Therefore, no consideration will be given to anything enclosing infinite nature. It is not in the nature of what is unenclosed to be grasped. But every desire for the Good which is attracted to that ascent constantly expands as one progresses in pressing on to the Good. This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, II.238-239).

The third theophany – Knowing the Unknown – is not different in kind from the first and second theophanies. Like in those theophanies, Moses sees by non-seeing, knows by unknowing, understands by non-understanding. He does not know anything about God besides the fundamental truth that God is. All three theophanies show this one fundamental truth: GOD IS. One must treat these three revelations of “the Existing” as one great theophany (and must see this in the analysis of the third theophany), as the great revelation of God to his people. But God is still the Unknown God. *Tu est Deus absconditus*.

In the commentary to the fragments from *De vita Moysis* which analyses the third theophany from Exodus, Thomas Böhm says: „In der dritten Theopanie hebt Gregor von Nyssa zunächst hervor, daß man die alttestamentliche Erzählung (Moses in der Felsspalte) unmöglich wörtlich verstehen könne. Denn man müßte bei einer wörtlichen Interpretation annehmen, daß bei der *visio facialis* für Gott eine Vorne und Hinten voranzusetzen ist. Die korrespondierenden Begriffe «vorne/hinten» könnten in eigentlicher Weise aber nur von körperlichen Gegenständen mit einem σχήμα ausgesagt werden. Ein Körper ist aber immer zusammengesetzt (z.B. aus

den Verschiedenen Elementen), somit nicht unauflöslich und gologisch der φθορα unterworfen. Dies könne aber nicht auf Gott zutreffen. Deshalb ist es nach Gregor nur sinnvoll, diese Stelle in Rahmen seiner Theorie der αλληγορία bzw. der Θεωρία auszulegen" (Böhm 1966, p. 256-257).

THE FINAL REMARKS

The analysis of Gregory of Nyssa, which aims at the interpretation of the three theophanies from Exodus, presents – from the metaphysical and epistemological points of view – three fundamental ideas. First, the idea of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God; second, the idea of the real difference between essence and energies in God's Being; and third, the idea of the real difference between the one essence, three persons (*hypostases*) and many uncreated divine energies (the powers or names) of God. These ideas – sometimes *explicit*, sometimes *implicit* – will be a starting point for many future philosophical treatises within Greek Christianity, especially for the treatises of Gregory Palamas. But this philosophical and theological program will be unknown for the Latin Christian writers of the West.

One must say that the absolute unknowability of the essence of God means that God is forever the unknown God – not only for the human mind which is deficient due to the corruption of original sin, but even after resurrection. This problem was analysed in the writings of John the Evangelist. But absolute unknowability does not mean agnosticism. Unknowability means knowability by unification, but not by knowledge. As a consequence there is no abstract theology here (like in Western scholasticism), which uses concepts and logical propositions, but the contemplative, or mystical theology which raises the mind to the reality which surpasses understanding. The Bible, however, often describes the act of seeing God – Moses talks to God face to face just like with a friend; people – as Paul says – can see God face to face after their resurrection. The author of Exodus together with the Greek Christian theologians and philosophers says in symbolic language: Moses saw the Glory of Jahweh. God can be named in different ways: glory, light, wisdom, power, life and many others. But what do these names mean?

Christian philosophers state that God who is unknown in his essence will be known in his uncreated energies. These energies are the powers of God which are given many different names. They are the names of God. The difference between essence and energies reflects the biblical idea of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God. God is unknown in his

essence and is known in his energies. The Greek Christian philosophers retain the God of the Bible, the God who is both transcendent and immanent. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but He is not the God of philosophers.

Exodus shows that God, who is, is also the God who is unseen and who reveals Himself to his people. The true Christian faith is faith in such a God. The true Christian philosophy acknowledges such a God. This God is the beginning, the centre and the end of all philosophical analysis.

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