



UNIVERSITATEA
LUCIAN BLAGA
— DIN SIBIU —



Interdisciplinary Doctoral School

Domain: THEOLOGY

DOCTORAL THESIS

Agnosticism: pastoral-missionary challenge

for the Romanian Orthodox Church

(Doctoral Thesis Summary)

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SUMMARY

KEYWORDS: agnosticism, Anomoeanism, Saint John Chrysostom, apology, secularization, knowledge of God, reason, the impossibility of knowledge.

Our option for studying and evaluating the issue of agnosticism is based on the natural concern, from the point of view of any responsible Christian, about the obvious advance of non-religiosity, that is, of the rejection or detachment from the religious faith - a predictable and all the more regrettable corollary of the proliferation of values subsumed to modernity and secularization. After all, through the uncertainty he systematically cultivates about the existence of God, respectively by refusing to believe in Him under the pretext that His existence would be rationally unfathomable, therefore doubtful, uncertain, agnosticism constitutes, along with atheism and indifference, in one of the possible forms of materialization of contemporary irreligiousness, hypostasizing more and more acutely the lack of concern of the contemporary man for what transcends the materiality of his daily life. Unbelief in God motivated by man's supposed inability to know Him and to trust His existence will represent, implicitly, a characteristic of our world dominated by consumerist-utilitarian axiologies cultivated by secularization and propagated by the continuous growth of globalization and, at the same time, one of the quantifiable effects generated by the ever-visible tendency of the civil society of modern and postmodern origin to exclude the Church and faith from the center of socially acceptable concerns and isolate it in a rather infrequent "periphery", marginalizing it and challenging its general human significance, as well as the community utility.

Basically, assuming and professing an agnostic theological attitude is tantamount to disavowing faith as a defining way of relating man to God, for faith in something whose existence, although perfectly possible, is uncertain, cannot be credited with any value of use. Without explicitly denying the existence of God as the atheist does, the agnostic will refuse to relate to Him, refusing to believe in Him (Genesis 15:6) and, at the same time, to trust Him (John 14:1). Implicitly, the "logic" of agnosticism will completely disavow the exercise of faith by considering it to be completely useless, even if, theologically speaking, it is according to the will of God and, therefore, of our duty, to base our lives on the virtue of faith in God (Colossians 1: 23), to persevere in its practice (Acts 14:22), to fight for it (I Timothy 6, 12) and to strengthen it relentlessly (Luke 17:5), so that "if the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, then the beginning of foolishness is not to know God" (St. John Chrysostomos). We will

therefore be called, by our very nature built by God in His own image (Romans 2: 14), to work incessantly by faith (Romans 14: 22 – 23) to defend and strengthen ourselves in it (I Corinthians 16:13) to confess it to ourselves (II Corinthians 4: 13 – 14) and to become true through the work of good waters (Jacob 2, 14 – 26), perfectly entrusted being that, only by doing so, we will be able to hope to re-enter the love communion of the Holy Trinity, as "without faith [...] it is not possible to please God, for he who draws near to God must believe that he is..." (Hebrews 11:6). Therefore, only by exceeding his reserves, some able to alienate him from God and his grace (I Thessalonians 2: 13) – for, as St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote, "there is a great sickness of doubt and deprives us of the gifts of God"¹ – and, at the same time, persevering in the practice of faith (Revelation 2:10), the agnostic man will be able to hope for the care with which the Creator surrounds those who believe in him, protecting them ("on the path of His pious ones stands watch" – Parables of Solomon 2: 8), blessing them (Deuteronomy 11: 13) and rewarding them (Matthew 25: 21 – 23).

In itself, contemporary agnosticism can be regarded as an "extension" (decisively influenced by the non-religious spirit of modernity and, of course, by the considerable progress of the positive sciences) at the theological level, more precisely in the plane of religious thought, belief and practice, of the accumulations of modern philosophical skepticism and, in particular, of the epistemological visions regarding the transcendent reality developed by thinkers of the size of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, William Hamilton, August Comte and, of course, Herbert Spencer, the one to whom we owe what we might call contemporary theological agnosticism. Basically, agnosticism acquires, principledly and from a methodical perspective, the reservations expressed by all these thinkers towards the depth and accuracy of human knowledge in general, and in relation to the possibility of knowing transcendence, in particular, giving the lack of penetrability and accuracy of the cognitive enterprises with which philosophical gnoseology operates, theological accents proper and switching in the plane, however distinct, of thinking, of religious reflection. Thus, the agnostic will "cut" from the vast and complex issues of philosophical skepticism, only one "segment", that of theognosia, giving it an exclusive and completely independent attention to how it perceives the question of knowledge of the tangible world. The agnostic will be, therefore, a skeptic who censors his skepticism, deliberately limiting his scope to the exclusive (and special) domain of

¹ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sf. Ioan*, Cărțile 7 și 8, în *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* (la următoarele citări vom abrevia *PSB*), vol. 41, trad., introducere și note de Preotul Profesor Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 2000, p. 755.

transcendence and who, therefore, opts to manifest it, unilaterally, by putting the existence of God under the sign of uncertainty.

Thus, detaching from all the decisive cognitive referential represented by the supernatural revelation and starting from the premise that doubt about the existence of divinity would be more "rational", more logically sustainable, than the trenchant affirmation of its existence or non-existence, the agnostic forgets that, in reality, "the best thing is the research united with the faith" and, at the same time, that "on the foundation of faith is built the great knowledge of the truth", of the truth that we must believe (II Thessalonians 2: 13), in which we must live (I John 1: 6) and which we must confess (Zechariah 8: 16; Ephesians 4: 25) to be guided by God (Psalm 42: 3), cleansed (I Peter 1: 22), and sanctified (John 17: 17 – 19). Basically, the one who doubts the existence of God (although he does not explicitly deny it and, moreover, considers it to be possible) is outside the Church and excludes himself from the work of Christ's salvation, since this, the Church, is the only gift who "keeps us belonging to God" and "reserves the kingdom of the Lord for its sons" and, moreover, "what use is it to you that Christ came in the flesh, if he did not come into your soul?".

That is why St. Basil the Great considered that doubt regarding the existence of God and, implicitly, in connection with His pronouncing and saving work, is tantamount to "walking in the counsel of unbelievers" (Psalm 1: 1), with alienation from God and self and, implicitly, with the abandonment of the deepest aspirations of the human nature: ".. if you say in your heart: Is it God who rules all of the world? Is it God who chivernises those of everyone? Is it, is it, judged? [...] No, somehow, does the world move by itself and some irrational happenings make everyone's life laugh in an irregular way? If you have thought so, you have walked in the counsel of unbelievers."

Structure of the doctoral thesis

For the adequate capitalization of the bibliographic resources used, as well as for the consolidation of the depth and theological relevance of our work, we resorted to a working method based on the judicious corroboration of the analysis and synthesis activities of the data provided by the consulted materials, as follows:

- the synthesis activity was used especially in the chapters and subchapters of the work which, afferent to the issues related to agnosticism, included: the brief presentation of the historical path of skepticism, the exposition of the cognitive role of the divine revelation and the going through the fundamental problems of theognosia or going through the main directions of the pastoral-missionary action of the Church;
- the synthesis activity proved its usefulness especially in those sequences of the work in which issues such as: the specific content and theological-philosophical significance of agnosticism were addressed, the diagnosis of contemporary religiosity and the impact of the factors that influence the global advance of non-religiosity, the evaluation of how Christian revelation and theognosia can counteract the assumptions of agnosticism or the ways of optimizing the pastoral-missionary activities of The Church in the contemporaneity dominated by secularism.

That is why, in order to reflect and concretize the most explicit manners of the above objectives – some of which inevitably complained about a multidisciplinary approach, hence the relatively numerous references circumscribed to philosophy or sociology to which we had to appeal – we opted for the structuring of our work on four main parts (each with each with each with two thematic chapters), as follows:

Part One - Profile of Agnosticism. Historical, theological and philosophical perspectives, dedicated to the analysis of the phenomenon in question from the complementary perspectives of theology and philosophy; thus, theological issues such as the relation of agnosticism with atheism are included here, and the analytical perspectives opened by Bertrand Russell, Antony Flew or Richard Dawkins are capitalized; then, referring to the philosophical gnoseo-logia, we have briefly gone through the analyses on angnosticism carried out by Robin Le Poidevin or Matthew McGrath and I made a review of the main ancient and modern

philosophical antecedents of agnostic thinking, with references to Parmenides of Elea, Gorgias of Leontinoi, Pyrrhon of Elis or Sextus Empiricus, respectively to David Hume, Immanuel Kant, William Hamilton or August Comte sau Herbert Spencer;

Part two - The context of agnosticism. Explorations in contemporary religiosity are aimed, in substance, at reviewing and evaluating the societal environment and the factors that potentiate the ascendant path of agnosticism in the contemporary; to this end, we have used the diagnoses on modern religiosity made by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann,

Hans Küng or Christos Yannaras and sociologists like Peter L. Berger and Bryan Wilson and I went through the analyses conducted by Eric Voegelin, H.-R. Patapievici, Matei Călinescu, Stefano Zamagni, Jean Baubérot, Wolfgang Welsch or Nicolae Achimescu on how the advance of uncertainties regarding the existence of God is enhanced by the parallel progress of the non-religious "spirit" specific to modernity, globalization, secularization and postmodernity;

Part Three - Rejection of agnosticism. Biblical, patristic and dogmatic landmarks emphasize the importance of divine revelation (natural and supernatural) in terms of certifying the existence of God and overcoming, in this way, the ensemble of the reservations formulated by agnosticism; the same objective is subsumed by the synthesis undertaken regarding three of the possible forms of knowing God (respectively the natural, supernatural and existential "ways"), the most appropriate from the perspective of counteracting agnosticism; for the elaboration of these syntheses were used all the biblical, patristic and dogmatic resources that were at our disposal;

Part Four - Pastorate of Agnosticism. Catechetical and missionary perspectives are intended to go through the priority content elements of missionary approaches and strategies, respectively catechetical activities that can be used to manage the challenge that agnosticism does not cease to represent; in this context, it was insisted, on the one hand, on the issues, theologically defining, represented by triadology, Christology and pneumatology (fundamental from the perspective of doubt with regarding the God that agnosticism cultivates), and on the other hand, on the ecclesiological and Eucharistic dimensions of orthodox missiology, being highlighted, in accordance with the analyses made by Father Ion Bria and Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, the sacramental-liturgical vocation of any missionary endeavor.

Given that the in-depth study of the issues raised by agnosticism involved a more extensive area of scientific research, which exceeded, not infrequently, the limits of the

field of theology, the bibliographic resources used for the elaboration of our work included the following categories of specialized materials:

- articles, studies and syntheses of theology, with predilection applicability in the areas of dogmatics, theognosia, orthodox missiology and theological anthropology; of course, these categories of resources were joined by the translations and collections of patristic writings elaborated within our Church; on this basis, we have proposed the elaboration of multicriteria theological diagnoses regarding the premises, the "theoretical" content and the needs claimed by the optimization of the pastorate of agnosticism;
- anthologies, studies and syntheses of philosophy and history of ancient, modern and contemporary philosophy, with emphasis on the issues of gnoseology in general, and philosophical theognosia in particular; thus, we took into account the most precise location of the current "theological agnosticism" in the context, wide and diversified, of philosophical skepticism, as well as the most complete evaluation of its peculiarities from the perspective of the general issues of epistemology;
- articles, studies, papers dedicated to the issue of the interaction of religion with the macro-social phenomena represented by modernity, globalization, secularization and postmodernity, respectively to the study of these interferences from theological (dogmatic, anthropological, soteriological) and sociological perspectives; using this category of materials, we have tried to frame agnosticism among the current, obviously broader, trend of moving civil society away from the values specific to the religious faith.

CHAPTER I. PROFILE OF AGNOSTICISM

HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

1.1.1 Agnosticism in the theological sense

Viewed from the perspective of theology, agnosticism (a privativ + gnostikós – knowledge, comprehension) integrates those conceptions – intellectual or, on the contrary, too little preoccupied with meanings and concepts – after which "one cannot know either practically or in principle, whether God exists or not". In other words, it is agnostic for the one for which the existence of divinity can neither be affirmed nor denied, both options being equally sustainable and, implicitly, possible from a logical and rational point of view, including from the perspective of science or philosophy. No cognitive mechanism, no matter how elaborate and complex it may be, will provide results in the particular domain of God's world, so that authentic knowledge - epistémē will not be able to penetrate beyond the barrier of the sensitive world, the intelligible - noētón cannot be, in principle, cognizable - gnōrimon . Implicitly, the existence of God, although coherent and perfectly possible in itself, will not be able to be verified and demonstrated at least in the present stage of human knowledge, one, at least temporarily, with a functionality limited to the domain of the sensitive - aisthētón.

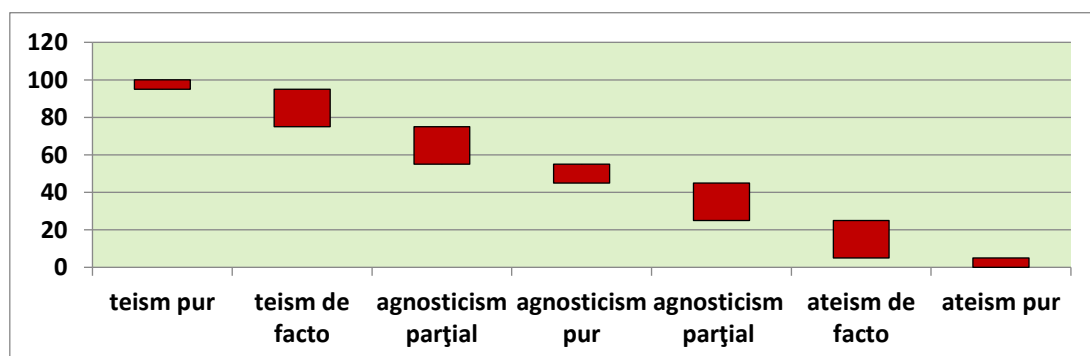
Thus, addressing the problem of the existence of divinity – of existence as such and not of nature or its attributes² – and seeking to solve it, theological agnosticism opts de facto for what the ancient skeptics called the suspension of judgment – epoché, that is, for the refusal of deliberation and pronouncement in the problem under consideration. Basically, as long as both alternatives possible "positives", namely "God exists" - the believer's solution, respectively "God does not exist" - the solution of the atheist, appear, in the logic of agnosticism, as being equally possible, no criterion and no reference system would be able to legitimize (and impose) one to the detriment of the other. In this way, the agnostic prefers to "stop" his cognitive investigation at the distant limits of the sensitive, an eventual overcoming of this barrier attracting the impossibility of knowing as such. Therefore, any attempt to "prove" the existence

² Francis E. Peters, *Termenii filosofiei grecești*, traducere de Dragan Stoianovici, Ediția a II-a revăzută, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1997, p. 21.

of God by rational means, either on the basis of natural revelation or on that of the well-known "arguments" consecrated, equally, by Roman Catholic theology and occidental philosophy, will be, aprioristically, doomed to failure, precisely because, once the area of the tangible world has been overcome, any logical construction will not be able to be verified, thus becoming inoperative. In reciprocity and for the same reasons, agnosticism refuses to assume the eventual "demonstration" of the non-existence of divinity, repudiating the speculative attempts of argumentation specific to atheism, which it considers as irrelevant at the same time and equally with those – opposites – usually invoked by the theological-philosophical theistic discourse.

Basically, unlike "integral" atheism and theism, theological agnosticism refuses to appropriate its act of faith as taking a position at the gnoseological level, as long as it, faith, does not appear to be methodologically and pragmatically exploitable in a cognitive sense. Paradoxically though, claiming, in spite of the natural and, especially, the supernatural revelation that the existence of God inevitably escapes knowledge, theological agnosticism does not – in the absence of evidence or arguments completely irrefutable and unanimously admitted – do anything but affirm its own belief in man's inability to decide on the existence or non-existence of the Creator. An assurance, obviously, of another degree, for, being devoid of object, it does not presuppose faith--as something postulated a priori as existent (either transcendent and creative divinity, or the "nothingness" of atheism), but the acceptance and validation (inevitably subjective), as the only valid gnoseological position, of the refusal to believe.

In fact, the "theological" relations between theism, agnosticism and atheism can be subjected to an integrated theoretical analysis based on the criterion – immediately – represented by the position, firmer or more nuanced, adopted in the question of the existence or non-existence of God. So did, for example, the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins with his Spectrum of theistic probability (2006), a scale staggered over seven levels of "cognitive safety" quantified as a percentage, by means of which the "degree" of assurance of individuals regarding the existence of God can be commended.



1.1.2 Agnosticism in the philosophical sense

Naturally, the philosophical understandings of agnosticism are more extensive than theological ones, these being connected to a significant part of the vast epistemological problem represented by the "truth value" of human knowledge.³ Thus, modern and contemporary philosophical agnosticism "expresses that conscious attitude of doubt, denial or distrust towards some or even all of man's powers to know"⁴, aiming therefore, as an object / purpose of denial, respectively of human incapacity, more or less complete, to estimate and achieve the truth as such, possible, total or partial, to know, the intelligible - *noētón* and the sensitive - *aisthētón*, which, separately or together, it will subject to the "regime" to systematic doubt, with all the consequences that result from it. In addition to "covering" the problem of the veracity of knowledge (both of man and the Cosmos, as well as of the field of transcendence and divinity), philosophical agnosticism also affects the actual way of approaching it, interpreting it as being concretizable by reason (epistemological rationalism) and /or by sensation (empiricism), and operationalizing it in the most varied forms, culminating in the programmatic postulation of the impossibility of knowledge⁵. As a result, agnosticism "covers" a wide range of areas of cognitive interest, from philosophy to science, and from religion to ethics, thus including, as a particular component, the issue of systemic doubt about the existence vs. the non-existence of God.

Thus conceived, modern philosophical agnosticism practically integrates the gnoseological problem of the older ancient skeptical ancient and modern currents, although the founding reasons of the two epistemological visions are rather divergent (as we will see in sufficient detail), given the fact that, in essence, the ancient doubt was edified as a direct reaction to the presuppositions of empirical dogmatism, the one who postulated the possibility of the comprehension of existence *in integrum*, while the modern one aims at the limits of knowledge as a project and methodological enterprise enshrined. However, modernity has put between ancient skepticism and agnosticism the sign of equivalence, so that the two concepts – aiming, both, at "those theories of the limitation of human knowledge that deny the constitutional capacity of the mind to know [fully and truthfully] reality and end with the

³ Al. Posescu, *Introducere în filosofie*, Ediția a III-a, Ed. Garamond, București, 2000, p. 169.

⁴ Edmund Shanahan, *art. cit.*, [accesat la 31.07.2022].

⁵ Al. Posescu, *op. cit.*, Ediția a III-a, p. 169.

recognition of an intrinsic Inkressible. "⁶ –, they are, to a large extent, interchangeable, which does not exclude their differentiated use according to the concrete issues envisaged, a perspective to which we will also rally.

a) In itself, the term agnosticism is a recent one, being first used in 1869 by the British Thomas Henry Huxley (1825 – 1895), an evolutionary biologist and anthropologist, in order to express his personal conviction that, both religion and science or philosophy, cannot credibly probe and cannot draw completely demonstrable conclusions about the ultimate essence of the problems he is trying to address.

It is relevant, however, that, defining the concept of agnosticism in this manner, Thomas Huxley had in mind to highlight his considerable personal reservations towards what he considered to be the cognitive "excess" of the mythologies of ancient Gnosticism, respectively the abundance of the "details" circulated by these systems regarding the hierarchical structure of the intelligible, detailed world – the fruit of an overflowing religious imaginary, but completely speculative.⁷

b) Examining philosophical agnosticism in relation to atheism, on the one hand, and theism, on the other (theism by virtue of which God is seen as "the final and intentional cause of the existence of the Universe" and, at the same time, as "the supreme source of love and morals")⁸, the British academic Robin Le Poidevin elaborated and proposed a reasoning at the end of which agnosticism would constitute itself in the only logically acceptable solution to the problem of the existence of divinity.

To that end, Le Poidevin defines the concept of 'intrinsic probability', meaning the probability, *po*, of a logical statement (corresponding to an event in its own right) of being true as such, that is, before being investigated and evaluated in terms of veracity.

Thus defined, the 'intrinsic probability' of a statement will depend exclusively on the 'inner features of the sentence in question', that is, on the immediate and apriorically known characteristics of the event concerned, thus being obviously different from the 'final'

⁶ Edmund Shanahan, *art. cit.* [accessed 31.07.2022].

⁷ Regarding the exuberant Gnostic mythology can be consulted, for example, the reference works elaborated by I.P. Culianu (*Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, translated by Thereza Petrescu, Ed. Nemira, Bucharest, 1995 and *Arborele Gnozei*, translated by Corina Popescu, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2005).

⁸ Robin Le Poidevin, *op. cit.*, pp. 48 – 53. Cf. și Paul Draper, *Atheism and Agnosticism*, în Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022 Edition, article available on the website <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/atheism-agnosticism> [accessed on 15.08.2022].

probability, p , with which we will credit it *a posteriori*, respectively after we have examined it closely.

Let's follow step by step the content of the reasoning that Robin Le Poidevin proposes to justify the exclusive logical sustainability of agnosticism:

1. there is no completely truthful basis on which it can be stated that the "intrinsic probability" of theism is greater than that of atheism and each other; in other words, there would be no *a priori* argument for considering that theism is, in itself, more likely than atheism, with reciprocity being equally valid, therefore, until the in-depth investigation of the matter, the existence and non-existence of God must be regarded as equally possible;
2. examining the arguments that can be invoked to support the existence or non-existence of God, it can be found that there is no reason to decide in favor of some or others; practically, neither of the arguments put forward in support of one of the two options can prove to be decisive.

1.2 From ancient skepticism to modern agnosticism

To the skeptics of all times, the ever-limited character of human knowledge has been regarded as unquestionable, just as neither the senses nor reason can provide us with truth in all its depth and completeness. Thus, in the space of epistemological approaches of this type, doubt is elevated to the rank of a true principle, as long as, acting at the systemic level, it is able to "dilute" the depth and completeness of any cognitive endeavors. Of course, as mentioned above, skepticism was and is far from constituting a perfectly homogeneous gnoseological vision, but on the contrary, it carries nuances and involves particular approaches. We can thus discern a pure skepticism which, in Hellenistic thought, considered that the refusal of deliberation and decision would represent the most correct gnoseological positioning; then, we encounter, both in the ancient world and in modernity, a multitude of "moderate" attitudes of the same vision, which, admitting the possibility of knowledge, always outlines its insurmountable limits. At the same time, the area of application of the 'principle of doubt' can integrate both the intelligible – *noētón*, and the sensitive – *aisthētóni*, thus treating them from

a unitary perspective, or, on the contrary, it can give them completely different meanings and reference levels.

Therefore, we believe that the synthetic reading of some of the main historical landmarks – ancient, modern and contemporary – of the epistemological skepticism can contribute to a better clarification and systematization of the general philosophical peculiarities of the concept in question, so that, on this basis, the accents, connotations and, especially, the theological implications of the "principle of doubt" will be easier to highlight and commend.

1.1.2 Agnosticism in the philosophical sense

Naturally, the philosophical understandings of agnosticism are more extensive than the theological ones, these being connected to a significant part of the vast epistemological problem represented by the "truth value" of human knowledge. Thus, modern and contemporary philosophical agnosticism "expresses that conscious attitude of doubt, denial or distrust towards some or even all of man's powers to know"⁴⁸, aiming therefore, as an object / purpose of denial, respectively of human incapacity, more or less complete, to estimate and achieve the truth as such, possible, total or partial, to know, the intelligible - *noētón* and the sensitive - *aisthētón*, which, separately or together, it will subject to the "regime" to systematic doubt, with all the consequences that result from it. In addition to "covering" the problem of the veracity of knowledge (both of man and the Cosmos, as well as of the field of transcendence and divinity), philosophical agnosticism also affects the actual way of approaching it, interpreting it as being concretized by reason (epistemological rationalism) and /or by sensation (empiricism), and operationalizing it in the most varied forms, culminating in the programmatic postulation of the impossibility of knowledge⁴⁹. As a result, agnosticism "covers" a wide range of areas of cognitive interest, from philosophy to science, and from religion to ethics, thus including, as a particular component, the issue of systemic doubt about the existence vs. the non-existence of God.

Thus conceived, modern philosophical agnosticism practically integrates the gnoseological problem of the older ancient skeptical ancient and modern currents, although the founding reasons of the two epistemological visions are rather divergent (as we will see in sufficient detail), given the fact that, in essence, the ancient doubt was edified as a direct reaction to the presuppositions of empirical dogmatism, the one who postulated the possibility of the comprehension of existence in *integrum*, while the modern one aims at the limits of

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- b) Examining philosophical agnosticism in relation to atheism, on the one hand, and theism, on the other (theism by virtue of which God is seen as "the final and intentional cause of the existence of the Universe" and, at the same time, as "the supreme source of love and morals")⁹, the British academic Robin Le Poidevin elaborated and proposed a reasoning at the end of which agnosticism would constitute itself in the only logically acceptable solution to the problem of the existence of divinity.

To that end, Le Poidevin defines the concept of 'intrinsic probability', meaning the probability, po , of a logical statement (corresponding to an event in its own right) of being true as such, that is, before being investigated and evaluated in terms of veracity.

⁹ Robin Le Poidevin, *op. cit.*, pp. 48 – 53. Cf. și Paul Draper, *Atheism and Agnosticism*, în Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022 Edition, article available on the website <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/atheism-agnosticism> [accessed at 15.08.2022].

Thus defined, the 'intrinsic probability' of a statement will depend exclusively on the 'inner features of the sentence in question', that is, on the immediate and apriorically known characteristics of the event concerned, thus being obviously different from the 'final' probability, p , with which we will credit it a posteriori, respectively after we have examined it closely. Let's follow step by step the content of the reasoning that Robin Le Poidevin proposes to justify the exclusive logical sustainability of agnosticism: there is no completely truthful basis on which it can be stated that the "intrinsic probability" of theism is greater than that of atheism and each other; in other words, there would be no a priori argument for considering that theism is, in itself, more likely than atheism, with reciprocity being equally valid, therefore, until the in-depth investigation of the matter, the existence and non-existence of God must be regarded as equally possible; examining the arguments that can be invoked to support the existence or non-existence of God, it can be found that there is no reason to decide in favor of some or others; practically, neither of the arguments put forward in support of one of the two options can prove to be decisive.

1.2 From ancient skepticism to modern agnosticism

To the skeptics of all times, the ever-limited character of human knowledge has been regarded as unquestionable, just as neither the senses nor reason can provide us with truth in all its depth and completeness. Thus, in the space of epistemological approaches of this type, doubt is elevated to the rank of a true principle, as long as, acting at the systemic level, it is able to "dilute" the depth and completeness of any cognitive endeavors. Of course, as mentioned above, skepticism was and is far from constituting itself in a perfectly homogeneous gnoseological vision, but on the contrary, it has nuances and involves particular approaches¹⁰. We can thus discern a pure skepticism which, in Hellenistic thought, considered that the refusal of deliberation and decision would represent the most correct gnoseological positioning; then, we encounter, both in the ancient world and in modernity, a multitude of "moderate" attitudes of the same vision, which, admitting the possibility of knowledge, always outlines its insurmountable limits. At the same time, the area of application of the 'principle of doubt' can integrate both the intelligible – *noētón*, and the sensitive – *aisthētóni*, thus treating them from

¹⁰ Al. Posescu, *op. cit.*, Ediția a III-a, pp. 176 – 177.

a unitary perspective, or, on the contrary, it can give them completely different meanings and reference levels.

Therefore, we believe that the synthetic reading of some of the main historical landmarks – ancient, modern and contemporary – of the epistemological skepticism can contribute to a better clarification and systematization of the general philosophical peculiarities of the concept in question, so that, on this basis, the accents, connotations and, especially, the theological implications of the "principle of doubt" will be easier to highlight and commend.

1.2.1 In ancient thought

Until he acquires, from Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 360 – c. 270 î.Hr.), that skepticism "radical" and programmatically built around the supposed logical necessity of the suspension of judgment — epoché, Greek and Hellenistic philosophy has, over time, experienced a series of positions, approaches and attitudes more or less restrained towards the possibility of knowledge as such. Thus, the germs of what was to become the rigid skepticism of the Pyrrhonian era took shape, one preceded, for several centuries necessary for the decantation of ideas and the systematization of options, by searches and formulations marked by equivocations, but by exceptional rational intuitions and attempts, at the end of which skepticism was constituted, in its own right, as the solution directly opposed to so optimistic dogmatism, to the question of the fundamental importance of the "truth value" of human knowledge.

CHAPTER II. THE CONTEXT OF AGNOSTICISM, EXPLORATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOSITY

2.1 Diagnoses of religion in contemporary times

Undoubtedly, agnosticism is an integral part – like atheism or religious indifference, for that matter – of those defining attitudes through which postmodern civil society intends to relate to religious faith and practice, to ecclesial traditions and values from the interpenetration of which modernity itself was born. Basically, this represents a concrete way (and sufficiently precisely delimited in relation to other "theological" approaches with a similar result) of refusing religiosity, including the typical postmodern beliefs (syncretic, neognostic, esoteric, occult, etc.), some repudiated as trenchantly as the traditional ones or by the fundamentalisms that, not once, accompany them.

In fact, the "grouping", consisting of agnostics, atheists and indifferent people, is constituted in that non-religious segment of the population that opinion polls and sociological studies distinguish as such, opposing it to the "community of believers", that is, to those who, no matter *what* and *how*, understand to relate to the sacred. In fact, this "community of believers" is, in the very special conditions of the postmodern contemporaneity, a completely heterogeneous social corpus from the theological, cultural-liturgical and moral-ethical point of view – as this, post-modernity, ".. insists, first of all, on the primacy of diversity at the expense of unity, [on] the heterogeneity of discourse [and] worldviews" – in which Father Professor Nicolae Achimescu identifies¹¹ a number of four distinct components:

1. the "interactive sector", of the traditional beliefs, respectively the communities affiliated to the great institutionalized religions which, crossing modernity and overcoming its secularizing pressures, find themselves in a position to activate in the context of a disconcerting religious pluralism;

¹¹ Pr. prof. dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 312 and pp. 309 – 310.

2. the "fundamentalist sector", i.e. the communities that, in contact with modernity, have radicalized, absolutizing their theological peculiarities, allowing themselves to be influenced by various "theocratic" precedents and cultivating soteriological exclusivism;
3. "diffuse sector", in particular the non-institutionalized and non-dogmatic groups that reflect "spiritual" preoccupations of the most subjective, because, as Father Achimescu wrote, nowadays religion "is nothing but a personal option, after which you orient your life in a sense that you yourself propose";
4. "the neo-religious sector", the one that groups the adherents of the "new religious movements" (of Orientalist, neo-gnostic, occult, esoteric origins, etc.) appeared in the contemporaneity as a result of the "nonconformism" and its "challenging spirit", the direct echo of a "magical, therapeutic spirituality, detached from any religious institutions and traditions" that comes to mark the "decomposition and individualist secularization of any consecrated religiosity".
5. Given these aspects, we will be able to observe that the development of agnostic conceptions is directly connected to the complex and profound evolutions that religious faith and practice cross in contemporary times. Therefore, we will try in the following to synthesize some of the fundamental analytical perspectives regarding the current state of religiosity, structuring our presentation so that we can decrypt as easily as possible the theological, sociological and philosophical meanings of the developments in question.

2.1.1 Theological perspective

The diagnosis on theological criteria of the current dynamics of religiosity is, of course, decisive, precisely because the diversification and advance of new religious movements at the expense of institutionalized religions is one of the defining characteristics of the present. As a result, the role and place of traditional Churches in society is different today than it was, say, seven to eight decades ago, so that the proper understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon of non-religiousness – of which agnosticism is a constitutive part – requires us to refer to the conclusions of some of the most relevant specialists in the field.

a) Thus, analyzing the "functional position" of the Churches in the contemporary society, the well-known Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann identifies the following three tendencies¹² that could determine the dilution of authority and the weakening of their institutional coherence:

- the dismantling of the once organic link between formal membership in ecclesiastical institutions and individual initiatives and commitments in defending, supporting and promoting their activities and objectives (missionary, pastoral, social-philanthropic, etc.); in other words, between belonging to the Church and the actual involvement in its activities tends to create a rift, a conclusion valid even in the case of those for whom participation in cult activities is not doubled by an involvement beyond its limits;
- the tendency of institutionalized Churches to circumvent the importance of explicit adherence of adherents (more or less formal) to the values from which they are claimed; in other words, not relying on a voluntary decision, directly determined by the acceptance and assumption of certain value referentials (doctrinal, liturgical or ethical), the identification of individuals with the community of belonging will tend to become apparent, superficial;
- the accelerated "privatization" of the religious faith, in the sense of transforming it into a strictly personal exercise and with an equally resonant only individual; basically, the communal dimension of the religious fact, once defining and implicit, is diluted to the point where it will succumb to the pressure of an egocentrism (of economic origins, as we shall see) which, in the end, will significantly weaken the cohesion and clarity of the public discourse of the ecclesial institutions.

Faced with these tendencies, the traditional Churches will increasingly risk, Jürgen Moltmann points out, to become the promoters of what Jean Jacques Rousseau still called "civic religion", that is, of a formal faith, too little engaging, but certainly "integrated into the politics of states" by its very conformism and superficiality. Following this path, the Churches will see themselves put in the somewhat inevitable situation of compromising their "spiritual message", the one who, through its biblical-dogmatic grounds, can easily transcend any historical and, of course, political circumstances, in favor of consolidating a "functional accommodation" to the

¹² Andrei Marga, *Religia în era globalizare*, Ed. Academiei Române, Bucharest, 2014, p. 52.

circumstances of the times and places and, implicitly, of the (apparent) benefits provided by such a positioning. In doing so, traditional Churches will inevitably slide into the troubled zone of "identity crises" and "legitimacy issues", each of these merely expressing the state of crisis generated by the growing difficulties of traditional beliefs to find its place in a world itself shaken by the dissolution of traditional value referentials. Under these circumstances, Jürgen Moltmann's conclusion is far from being a favorable one for the current state of the traditional Churches, as long as many fundamental resorts of the Christian faith, such as biblical, Christological, Soteriological or eschatological ones, risk losing their reference value and intrinsic identity significance. However, the German theologian is not completely pessimistic, for a series of contemporary "facts" and theological processes come to foreshadow a certain resurrection of authentic Christian spirituality, while emphasizing the potential of postmodern religious discourse to evolve in a manner capable of responding to the aspirations of man and contemporary communities¹³.

2.1.2 Sociological perspective

The transformations crossed by the religious faith and practice in the contemporary, including those related to the advance of agnosticism, atheism and religious indifference, continue to be in the attention of sociologists, who identify in these developments a very special problem of study as which engages the deepest motivational and intellectual springs of individuals and communities. In fact, the circular dynamics of religiosity at the confluence of a modernity that, through Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud or Nietzsche, predicted its dissolution and a postmodernity that rediscovered it as a "permanent form of the spirit" (Franz Rosenzweig), induced an accentuated dynamic at the level of coagulation forms, socially acceptable values and behaviors, which could not fail to enter (and) the attention of sociology. In fact, the postmodern resurrection of religious faith (even subsumed to some of the most subjective and artificial approaches) has fully proved what the German sociologist Gerhardt Schmidtchen called "the native-perennial dimension of man's religiosity", an attribute (and no

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52 – 54.

less vocation) by virtue of which the process of secularization "means nowhere near the end of religion".¹⁴

At the heart of these transformations is, naturally, the man, the one who, surrounded on all sides by a modernity that tended to plunge him deeper and deeper into the abyss of the "death of God", rebelled against his own existential platitude, finally understanding that "the meaning of our life is revealed only when we discover our roots deeply embedded in the trinitarian and cosmic reality, in Christ" (acad. Dumitru Popescu). Thus, "even if tried, [modernity] has failed to suppress man's need and religious imagination"¹⁵, as he finds himself "in a constant search for the answer to the existential problems he poses", thus trying "to discover his own way [...], his own religiosity or pseudo-religiosity"²³⁵. In doing so, contemporary man managed to "break" the vicious circle in which he had been circumscribed (seemingly hopelessly) by the secularizing spirit of a modernity "born of a double opposition: that of the rights of God against man and that of the rights of man against God"²³⁶, rediscovering God and implicitly finding what the consumer society could not offer him: love, trust, peace, tranquility, kindness, generosity, hope.

The fact is that "even dead, God remains the incontrovertible reference of the world", the aspiration to Him remaining essentially intangible (despite the fact that the axiologies of the consumer society seemed to have suppressed it) in order to become manifest again when the modernity-induced "transcendental iconoclasm" has largely exhausted its attractiveness and the power of persuasion¹⁶. In these conditions, the contemporary resurrection of religious values, of spirituality in general, constitutes, as the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard recorded, in a "reaction", in a direct protest of individuals and communities towards the unilateral and, behold, artificial presuppositions in relation to the true human nature, of a modernity that did not understand that "it is not and cannot be everything".¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. Pr.. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Achimescu, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁵ Matei Călinescu, *Cinci fațete ale modernității*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2005, p. 72.

¹⁶ H.-R. Patapievici, *op. cit.*, p. 87 and p. 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14 and p. 121.

CHAPTER III. REJECTION OF AGNOSTICISM

BIBLICAL LANDMARKS, PATRISTIC AND DOGMATIC

3.1 The Revealing God

To the typically agnostic assumption of man's inability to decide and pronounce on the existence of God beyond any equivocation, theology opposes one of its fundamental concepts, namely that of divine revelation (lat. *revelatio* – discovery), capitalizing on it, both from the "theoretical" point of view (*i.e.* dogmatic) and from the pastoral-missionary perspective, in order to strengthen his faith, not only in the existence of God, but also in the possibility of man to know Him and to experience His perfect love. In fact, by the teaching of revelation – understood as a "exit" of God from *the "unapproachable light"* (I Timothy 6, 16), with the explicit purpose of making Himself known and, at the same time, of sharing with people in order to dehumanize them – theology disproves the basic presupposition of the agnosticism, namely the thesis after which the problem of the existence of God is an insolvent one, the most "wise" being the refusal of any positive (or negative) point of view in this regard.

Of course, from the point of view of the agnostics, any apologetic discourse that aims to support the certainty of the existence of God will be perceived apriorically as irrelevant as long as it will bet exclusively (or excessively) on a type of argument based, above all, on *The Holy Scripture* and the *Holy Tradition*, that is, in the last instance, on the supernatural revelation ("special" in many of the Protestant approaches). Such an approach will inevitably be considered to be a tribute to a "circular" reasoning, that is, to an erroneous argumentative construction, for, in the logic of those concerned, the existence of God cannot be inferred on the basis of a *biblical corpus* dependent on its very existence by the same God. Therefore, the natural revelation ("general" in the Protestant sense), as well as its immediate developments, will be the basis of the "replica" of theology to the agnostic uncertainty, the supernatural revelation having the purpose, fundamental from the pastoral-missionary point of view, to complete the apologetic effort thus initiated and to fulfill it not only in the form of a simple intellectual acceptance of the existence of God, but, above all, from the point of view of the "valorization" of faith--assurance through the ecclesiological affiliation of those concerned. It

is the indisputable merit of the Church to reject any temptation to "separate" the two forms of divine revelation – as happened in the West, with the most damaging consequences – so that, from an apologetic perspective, including in relation to agnostics and agnosticism, they will work perfectly in solidarity, bringing together reason and mystery, reasoning and mystery and increasing them, hence the intelligibility and the power of persuasion.

3.1.1 Revelation in general

If "*no one has ever seen God...*" (*John* 1:18) and, at the same time, "the image of God cannot be spoken of" precisely because he, the image of the Creator, "cannot be explained"¹⁸, it is doubtless that only divine revelation – that is, "the free, supernatural act by which God, on his own initiative and power, reveals himself to men"¹⁹, "the work by which God reveals himself to the created world"²⁰ or, in a Protestant perspective, "the revelation of God in creation, history, man's conscience, and Scripture"²¹ – it can make the unseen one cognizable to us (*I Timothy* 1: 17; *Colossians* 1, 15). The fact is that, in the absence of revelation, the one through which the transcendent God "reveals himself to man in his capacity as Creator and Protector", this man, lacking a judicious cognitive perspective on divinity, "could not know the meanings of his own existence, nor the meanings of the world or of the Cosmos"²², while losing "the connection with the Source of Life, the only one who can assure him a sound spiritual life..."²⁸².

3.1.2 Natural revelation

In relation to the insurmountable doubts of agnosticism, the natural revelation, respectively "the continuous appearance and presence of God within creation"²³, constitutes a

¹⁸ Teofil al Antiohiei, *Trei cărți către Autolic*, cartea întâi, III, în PSB, vol. 2, trad., introducere, note și indice de Pr. Prof. T. Bodogae, Pr. Prof. Olimp Căciulă, Pr. Prof. D. Fecioru, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1980, p. 375.

¹⁹ Pr. conf. dr. George Remete, *Dogmatică ortodoxă*, ediția a treia, revăzută și adăugită, Ed. Reînregirea, Alba Iulia, 2000, p. 91.

²⁰ Preot Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Revelație sau Descoperire*, în *Idem*, Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă, București, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1994, p. 336.

²¹ Paul Enns, *op. cit.*, pp. 157 – 158.

²² Pr. Prof. Dr. Ștefan Buchiu (coordonator), *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Vol. I, Ed. Basilica, București, 2017, p. 94.

²³ Nikos Matsoukas, *Introducere în gnoseologia teologică*, traducere de Maricel Popa, Ed. Bizantină, București, 1997, p. 159.

fundamental argument (and which cannot be suspected of any theological "apriorism", not being dependent on theological cognitive resources) for the certification (proofing, affirmation) of the existence of God beyond any doubt and, moreover, for a "preliminary" knowledge of his person and works in relative to tangible reality. Perfectly supported biblically and patristically, the natural revelation allows us, gnoseologically speaking and ignoring any considerations subsumed to the faith, to "ascend" from the created world and its immanent specificities, to the upper limit of transcendence, somehow "intuiting" God and fully trusting his existence, this in a movement of our mind and soul that comes to capitalize on that "active tension towards God" that Andrei Pleșu was talking about, the co-natural state of human nature and, therefore, the defining consequence of the "ontological status of the creature."²⁴

3.1.3 Supernatural Revelation

Even if, as we have seen, "the very edification is sufficient for the knowledge of the existence of God and his prophecy", the ²⁵fact of the fall has affected, through its fundamental anthropological implications, man's capacity to fructify the natural revelation with completeness and accuracy in order to know the person and the work of God has diminished, the possibility of the "distorted" understanding of the "meanings put into existence by the Creator" becoming more and more prominent. That is why "the initiative of the personal revelation of God as a perpetual presence and work in the world was necessary" – an initiative that led to the coagulation of what we call supernatural revelation – was necessary, the Creator himself being the One who, this time, "reveals himself to men through words and deeds, so that they may know Him as an absolute and loving Person, to know his will, as well as his plan concerning the world, as it unfolds in history." Implicitly, discovering Himself through explicit words, acts and deeds, God "sensitizes the subjective human perception for his notification as a person,"²⁶ the cognitive limitations inherent in natural revelation being thus overcome.

²⁴ Andrei Pleșu, *Jurnalul de la Tescani*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1993, p. 63.

²⁵ Sf. Atanasie cel Mare, *Trei cuvinte împotriva arienilor*, Cuvântul al II-lea, în PSB, vol. 15, trad. din grecește, introducere și note de Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1987, p. 267.

²⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ștefan Buchiu (coordonator), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 102.

3.1.4 The unity of divine revelation

From the perspective of Orthodoxy, natural and supernatural revelation constitute an indivisible whole, their connection collecting the "continuous reciprocity" that unites them in an epistemological context in which "even after receiving and assimilating the supernatural revelation, the natural one remains valid and efficient"²⁷. Therefore, if "the formal object of theology is precisely the divine revelation..."²⁷, the revelation which always has its ultimate origin in the Holy Spirit beyond any human distinctions, the Church has integrated both types of divine revelation into a single and unitary synthesis, fructifying them together as simultaneously valid sources for its sacramental teaching and work, and excluding any possible temptation to compromise their unity, for, the Spirit being One, "natural revelation cannot be separated or self-contained from the supernatural."²⁸

Thus, the borderline approaches consisting in the absolutization of the natural revelation (the case of deism), respectively of the supernatural one (corresponding to fideism), some, here, perfectly possible when the two forms of revelation are arbitrarily separated have remained completely unknown in an Orthodoxy perfectly aware of the fact that "he who wants to travel rightly and without mistake to God needs in a necessary way both [the forms of revelation], of the knowledge of Scripture in the Spirit and of the natural contemplation of things according to the spirit," precisely because "both the laws, the natural and the written, are of equal honor, and teach the same thing."²⁹

Therefore, given that "God has revealed the Truth as well as all that can be known of him..."³⁰, the Church refers both to natural revelation ("the world makes us know the word as Creator and to feel clearly his power and deity"³¹ and the supernatural one (which "expresses perfectly, once and for all, the work of creation, redemption and pronouncement of men and the world by God"³²), binding them organically and inseparably with the truth to be known (I

²⁷ Cristian Barta, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁸ Nikos A. Matsoukas, *Teologie dogmatică și simbolică*, vol. II, traducerea: Nicușor Deciu, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2006, pp. 33 – 34.

²⁹ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, Part II, 26, în *PSB*, vol. 80, trad. din grecește, introducere și note de Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1983 pp. 126 – 127.

³⁰ Origen, *Contra lui Celsus*, Cartea a VII-a, cap. 46, în *PSB*, vol. 9, trad., studiu introductiv și note de Pr. Prof. T. Bodogae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1984, p. 484.

³¹ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, Cuvântul IV, în *PSB*, vol. 40, trad., introducere și note de Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1994, p. 165.

³² Pr. conf. Dr. George Remete, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

Timothy 2:4), believed (*II Thessalonians 2:13*), sought (*Jeremiah 5:1*), and, last but not least, loved (*Zechariah 8:19*).

3.2 The possibility of knowing God

The fact that God can be known in the Holy Spirit and experienced, as a living and loving personal presence, in the form of a "progressive awareness of the presence of the Illuminating Word"³³ – for, as St. John the Theologian (*I John 3:2*) wrote, "we will be like Him [God], because we will see Him as He is" – *opsómetha autón kathós estin* – constitutes a decisive argument against the absolute uncertainty that agnosticism ascribes to the existence of the Creator. Thus, through His very cognoscibility ("making you immortal, you will see the immortal One [...], as long as you will be able to do so" - St. Theophilus of Antioch), as well as through the benevolence of being revealed and known by man (as "God comes into the soul and the soul moves into God" – St. Gregory of Nyssa), the Creator fully affirms his existence, the incarnation of the Word representing, as we know, the perfect expression of divine revelation (*John 1: 18*).

Thus, revelation - that is, God's self-discovery and theognosia - in this case man's actual knowledge of Him (of course, within the limits imposed by the ontological "distance" that separates the Creator from the creature) oppose and de-structure, perfectly solidary, the agnostic assumption after which no one and nothing could certify the existence of God, for, in the end, something that does not exist is neither discovered nor can be known.

That is why the exploration of the ways in which God can be known – as well as those related to His revelation, as we have seen above – can invalidate the presumptions of agnosticism, offering direct grounds in favor of the existence of God. Of course, from a consistent agnostic perspective, not all "ways of knowing God"³⁴ have the same relevance, some, such as the "mystical way" or the "path of the heart" cannot be practically operationalized in a current pastoral-missionary approach, as long as they require sufficiently antagonistic approaches and experiences to those enshrined in the theorists and proponents of agnosticism.

³³ Paul Evdokimov, *Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu...*, p. 21.

³⁴ Cf. Pr. conf. dr. George Remete, *op. cit.*, p. 121 și Pr. Prof. Dr. Ștefan Buchiu (coordonator), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 201.

As a result, we will focus in the following only on those "paths" that, in one way or another, can be valued from the point of view of missiology, in our opinion being here the natural and supernatural knowledge (directly related to the fructification of the divine revelation), as well as to the "existential" knowledge, respectively "in the concrete circumstances of life", with the mention that the first and the last may, more than the theognosia based on *St. Scripture on Holy Tradition*, to highlight the existence of God from the perspective of an agnostic for which arguments invoking divine inspiration or ecclesiology are rather irrelevant as they assume *a priori* the existence of God. However, we believe that, in addition to natural and existential knowledge, the supernatural one can also respond to the agnostic challenge precisely because, on the one hand, *the Holy Scripture*, with its richness of divine deeds, can create that intellectual and spiritual openness necessary to overcome the uncertainties regarding the existence of the Supreme Person, and on the other hand, it can "strengthen" the cognitive reverberations induced by the natural revelation, amplifying his intuitions and "channeling" it in the direction of fully accepting and approaching the human beneficiaries to the Creator and Protector of the world ("let us tend to the rays that illuminate us from the Holy Scriptures and let us be guided by their light to the hymns of praise of the deity" – St. Dionysius the Areopagite).

3.2.4 The unity of natural and supernatural knowledge

From the perspective of the pastorate of agnosticism, the unity of the two fundamental ways ("paths") of knowing God comes to emphasize that not so much that the assurance on the existence of the Creator can be acquired through any of the forms of divine revelation, but especially that a complete theognosia from a strictly cognitive point of view and, at the same time, usable sacramentally and liturgically in supporting the individual spiritual-spiritual progress, it can only be achieved by putting together revelation in its entirety, as it is presented to us in the light of reason (the natural one), respectively of the explicit revelations that God has made to man through His Word (the supernatural one). Therefore, we will go through below some of the determinant aspects circumscribed to the organic connection between the natural and supernatural knowledge of God³⁵, emphasizing the major "risks" of compromising the theological discourse that breaking this connection can prod

³⁵ Pr. conf. dr. George Remete, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

CHAPTER IV. PASTORATION OF AGNOSTICISM PERSPECTIVES CATECHETICAL AND MISSIONARY

4.1 Catechetical component

In the face of the systematic doubt of agnosticism, the Church's response will have to be aimed, in particular, at identifying and capitalizing, in the current pastoral-missionary activity, of those categories of arguments and reasonings capable of leading to the dismantling, obviously progressive, of all the intellectual uncertainties regarding the existence of God that theological (and / or philosophical) visions profess. From this perspective, the appeal to the Church's teaching to divine revelation (especially the natural one) and to the knowledge of God (especially that subsumed to existential and natural theognosy) constitutes a first step, in a first stage of missionary actions aimed at the phenomenon in question, these, revelation and theognosia being able to "provide" and oppose the presumptions of agnosticism (to a sufficient extent, we say) the first cognitive certainties regarding the existence of God, thus:

1. the certainty that God reveals himself to man (and that he can actually discover him), he being present in a mysterious (but manifest) way and being able to be "felt" at least in every detail, physico-mathematically modellable, of the tangible reality, as well as in all the circumstances of daily life, if not in certain circumstances, historically known, which manifestly outperforms the laws of nature;

the certainty that God can be known, at least in terms of some of His "qualities" (personal character, omnipotence, omniscience, wisdom, kindness), through the intercession of the facts of revelation, that is, by extrapolating the ontological significance of the immanent legalities that shape the material Universe, respectively through the introspective bending over the "psycho-social dynamics" of everyday existence.

Therefore, if God (1) reveals himself to man as the supreme Person and (2) this The person may be the "subject" of cognitive acts actually completed, then it is doubtful that God also exists that his existence is indisputable, simply because something nonexistent cannot be revealed and cannot be known. Therefore, once intellectually assimilated, the reality of

revelation and the possibility of theognosis can coagulate that "theoretical" platform on the basis of which the pastoral-missionary activity of the Church can manage the challenge represented by agnosticism using, more explicitly and systematically, *the Holy Scripture* and *the Holy Tradition*, that is, the "arguments" (including apologetic ones) that revelation and supernatural knowledge provide to it.

Under these circumstances, in a second stage of its pastoral-missionary response, the Church will the "replica" of agnosticism relying on the richness, full coherence and depth of its teaching about God "the One in the Trinity glorified and worshiped" as the prayer says, about God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, opposing the intellectual doubt and reserve, the certainty of Christian dogma, one perfectly conjoined by bringing and putting together, from a synergistic perspective, revelation and faith. In fact, in its gnoseological grasp – one connected to "the truths of faith revealed by God and formulated [as such] by the Church"³⁶ and, therefore, suprarational and paradoxical as long as it tries to verbally and ideationally circumscribe an infinitely distant and non-tangible reality – dogma, and especially the Trinitarian one, comes to outline and make explicit, within the limits of human capacities of perception³⁷, the Very Truth, that Truth inseparably bound to the persons of the Holy Trinity, to the Father ("*deliver me Lord, God of truth*" – *Psalm 30, 5*), from the Son ("*and I saw His glory, glory as of one born of the Father, full of grace and truth*" – *John 1, 14*) and from the Holy Spirit ("*The Spirit is the truth*" – *I John 5: 6*).

In these circumstances, the Church's teaching regarding God and the Holy Trinity, possibly approached from a perspective as "compatible" as possible with the predisposition of the agnostics for reasoning and argumentation – a perfectly possible approach as long as, as Father Dumitru Săniloae said, "the Holy Trinity is the supreme mystery of existence, which explains all or without which nothing can be explained; therefore, if it is the supreme mystery, it is somehow intelligible, conforming to a logic to a place"⁶⁰⁸ –, it will be able to disperse their reserves, giving them a cognitive security which, subsequently, the sacramental-liturgical work of the ecclesial institution will be able to complete by the habituation of those concerned.

³⁶ Cf. Pr. conf. dr. George Remete, *op. cit.*, pp. 23 – 26.

³⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ștefan Buchiu (coord.), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 155 – 156.

4.1.1 The Teaching of God

In our view, to speak of God from the general perspective of counteracting agnosticism, involves, in a first phase, the accentuation of those elements related to theognosia from the perspective of which the existence of the Creator and man's ability to know Him effectively will appear as a rational consequence of natural revelation. Starting from this and from the certainties thus accumulated, the catechetical discourse of the Church will also be able to use the data of supernatural revelation as quantified by *the Holy Scripture* and *the Holy Tradition*, so that, finally, it can fully capitalize on its dogmatic treasure regarding the Holy Trinity.

a) To the reserves of agnosticism, the Church will oppose, first of all, its exhaustive belief in the existence of God, "the first Christian statement"³⁸, the faith which, perfectly deductible rationally (as "this spectacle [the animate Cosmos] must be the work of a divine power, [so that] there must be a higher force that maintains the universe and which we could rightly call God.³⁹), is seen, at an introspective glance as deep as possible and without prejudices, as being "planted in a natural way in us", because, after all, "it is not questioned [...] nor by the multitude of heathen."⁴⁰ Thus, the universality of faith in the existence of God, as well as the implicit relation to Him, are seen as explicit works of grace, as "God dripped into all men [...] a divine emanation", so that they "even without their will testify that there is [there] an everlasting and uncreated God⁴¹.

Therefore, by bringing together the subsequent conclusions of natural revelation and those drawn from the valorization of existential theognosy (some often discerned by individual reflection and meditation!), the Church will respond to agnostic doubt by affirming the perfectly rational character and integral intellectual legitimacy of its assurance in the existence of God, for "listening to its reason, [men] may ascend to the Creator of all, to whom they may be entrusted as one who alone sustains all existence."⁴²

³⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Tratat de teologie...*, p. 82.

³⁹ Metodiul de Olimp, *Despre liberul arbitru*, II, în *PSB*, vol. 10, trad., studiu introductiv, note și indici de Pr. Prof. Constantin Cornițescu, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1984, p. 214.

⁴⁰ Sf. Ioan Damaschin, *op. cit.*, Capitolul III, Ediția a III-a, p. 17.

⁴¹ Clement Alexandrinul, *Cuvânt de îndem spre elini*, chap. 6, 68.2 – 68.3, în *PSB*, vol. 4, trad., introducere și indici de Pr. D. Fecioru, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1982, p. 126.

⁴² Origen, *Contra lui Celsus*, Cartea a IV-a, cap. 26, în *PSB*, vol. 9, trad., studiu introductiv și note de Pr. Prof. T. Bodogae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1984, p. 250.

Implicitly, the Church will highlight, in its catechetical activity, the fact that, as Father Stăniloae pointed out, the creation itself reveals God ("from what we caused or known we know about the existence of [God] or [about] the uncapped and unknown deity", the cognitive bending on the harmony and balance of the immanent reality or, if we want, on the physico-mathematical legalities that govern it, reflecting the fact that the whole existence stands under the sign of the omniscience and omnipotence of a supreme Reason that explains all ("from the unknown existence we understand those caused") and by which everything can be explained⁴³.

- It is precisely from this perspective that Origen of Alexandria emphasized the perfect concordance between the desideratum of the assertion of man's rationality and the belief in the existence of God, resorting to the following interrogation: "Who are the people without horizon if not those people who cannot lift their eyes and understand, starting from the greatness of the world and from the beauty of the creatures in it, that they must contemplate, admire and honor only him who created him?"⁴⁴.

In fact, the mere (be it rational) entrustment of man regarding the existence of a God who completely escapes his sensory experiences, constitutes a fact of maximum anthropological and gnoseological importance ("to know that [there is] the uncaused, unspeakable one above all those caused and who explains the existence of all – consciousness, love persons – is not an infinitely important fact?"), approving directly and in a very concrete way both his religious vocation and his openness to the transcendent⁴⁵. In addition, trusting that God exists, man succeeds, you still throw away, to openly assert his humanity (precisely because "man without God ceases to be a man" – Nikolai Berdiaev), implicitly finding something from the image of the Creator who is his constituent.

4.1.2 Christological referentials

The full appropriation of the Christian teaching regarding God – as a "response" to the apprehensions and inability of agnosticism to bring it closer together – involves, with necessity, also the exploration of the main cognitive landmarks regarding the person and work of the Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore, the catechetical discourse of the Church will also insist on the

⁴³ The priest professor Dumitru Stăniloae, *Holy Trinity...*, pp. 9 – 10.

⁴⁴ Origen, *Contra Iulius Celsus*, Book III, chap. 77, in *PSB*, vol. 9, trad., introductory study and notes of Fr. Prof. T. Bodogae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1984, p. 225.

⁴⁵ Cf. Preotul profesor Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta Treime...*, p. 19.

perfect deity of the Only Begotten Son of God (as "*in him dwelleth, bodily, all the fullness of the deity*" – *Colossians 2: 9*), on his incarnation "at the fullness of time" ("*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory...*" – *John 1: 14*) and, of course, in relation to His saving work ("*through the correction brought by the One came, for all men, the correction that gives life*" – *Romans 5: 15 – 18*), one concentrated in His sacrifice and resurrection.

It can be submitted that, "escaping" the natural revelation and being, from a point, incomprehensible, the Christian teaching about the "triune God", about the God "One in His deity", but "subsisting in three real and distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"⁴⁶, that is, about the deexistence in the deity, about the consubstantiality (Gk. *homoousios*, wide. *consubstantialis*) of the three persons (gr. *prosopon*) of the Holy Trinity, can represent the "key" of the missionary-pastoral discourse intended to counteract the agnosticism, because, once accepted "intellectually" and assimilated "spiritually", it can open to those concerned the way of true and full faith. Therefore, the judicious use, in addition to those afferent to natural theognosis, of the "christological" data provided by the supernatural revelation, respectively of *the Holy Scriptures* and of *the Holy Tradition*, is imposed as an imperative both for the certification of the Theandrisism of the Savior and from the perspective of the decisive soteriological significance of His sacrifice and resurrection.

4.1.3 Pnevmatological referentials

From the perspective of the pastorate of agnosticism, the Church's teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit (ebr. *Ruah*, gr. *Pneuma*) can be put in touch with that of Christ the Savior as a continuation and a permanent actualization of it in the sanctification of man and the world (*Acts 2: 33*) and as a divine "guarantee" of the sacramental power of the Church to intercede and guide the spiritual path of individuals and communities. This approach does not exclude, however, the preliminary going through and clarifying of the fundamental dogmatic problems regarding the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, an analytical perspective that we will also implement in the following. The older or more recent history of the Church highlights enough cases in which new testamentary biblical references that support the personal identity

⁴⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ștefan Buchiu (coord.), *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 266 – 267.

of the Holy Spirit were considered as insufficient or irrelevant, the Spirit being assimilated to a more or less divine "emanation", to a "power" or "force" active in the created world, but lacking the specific features of the person. On the contrary, the Church has always learned that the Holy Spirit is a person and, moreover, a divine person of being with the Father and the Son, the One who "*proceeds from the Father*" (*John 15:26*) to rest in the Son, who "comes [into the world] and is received as the Comforter of the Son" and, at the same time, "as one who accompanies the Word [...], showing himself on The Father and the Son even though he is not incarnate"⁴⁷

4.1.4 The teaching about the Holy Trinity

From the perspective of the pastorate of agnosticism, the entrustment acquired – through the cognitive capitalization, in and through the intercession of the Church, of the supernatural revelation, respectively of the Holy Scriptures – regarding the deity and consubstantiality with the Father of the Son and the Holy Spirit, will be valued in the direction of sustaining the teaching regarding the Holy Trinity, the fundamental creed of Christianity and the supreme foundation of the deification of man and the transfiguration of the entire creation. Of course, the "mystery of divinity, at the same time monad and triad"⁴⁸ transcends, in terms of its fundamental ontological contents, the power of understanding of man, but, as Father Stăniloae pointed out at one point, reason is given the ability, to the point and counting on the divine inspiration of the authors of the Holy Scriptures, to be able to theologians the Trinity, at least as much as it is necessary to anchor its spiritual life in a perfectly sustainable "theoretical" faith from biblically and dogmatically. Therefore, disregarding the complexity and theological depth of the problems related to Christian triadology, we consider that, in the light of the agnostic predisposition for capitalizing on the rational dimension of faith, the pastoral-missionary discourse of the Church intended to counteract it can be based on a series of biblical, patristic and dogmatic landmarks whose "logical" coherence, a specific coherence emphasized by Father Stăniloae, cannot be denied.

⁴⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Tratat de teologie...*, p. 146 și p. 144.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 47.

4.2 Missionary and liturgical component

If, from the perspective of acquiring the cognitive certainties after which agnosticism and agnosticism aspire, the "logic" of pastoring agnosticism in and by the Christian Church, supposes, as the first pastoral-missionary approach, the accentuation of the catechetical dimension circumscribed to the theological problem of the existence and knowledge of God, it is equally true that all the accumulations made in this way (and which can provide precisely the certainties of reasoning / intellectuals that are missing to the agnostics) cannot they acquired an authentic spiritual value if they were accompanied and "consolidated" by an effective religious life, able to capitalize on the landmarks provided by the divine revelation. Therefore, from the point of view of the specificity of the pastorate of agnosticism, the catechetical effort of the Church, absolutely necessary as I said before, will have to be augmented by a parallel action explicitly focused, this time, on what it means to practice faith, that is, on living it from a sacramental-liturgical perspective. Only in this way will the assurance in the existence of God and in man's ability to know Him be able to bear fruit in the sense of the "birth of water and of the Spirit" (John 3:5) of the one who believes, so that "every baptized" can access the life in Jesus Christ.

4.2.1 Missionary visions and approaches

Going beyond the area of the simple transmission of theological knowledge (no matter how thorough they may be), the missionary work of the Church (lat. *missio* – mission, reference) constitutes, above all, "in a saving call addressed to people outside the Church" (at which point it separates itself from the pastorate of those already in the *muros*), a specific call intended for "their incorporation into the Church through Baptism, Anointing and the Eucharist" and, at the same time, "their growth in the eschatological horizon of the kingdom of God"⁴⁹, that is, "to the perfection of the saints, to the work of the ministry, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4: 12). So, in order to fulfill the missionary vocation commanded by Christ himself ("going, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" – Matthew 28: 19), the Church will proceed,

⁴⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Valer Bel (coord.), *Misiologie Ortodoxă*, Vol. I, Ed. Basilica, București, 2021, p. 50.

praying incessantly for obtaining the help of the Holy Trinity, at the call and self-attachment of all those willing to believe in Christ, adding new members to the mysterious body of the Savior (Ephesians 1, 22-23), precisely because, "by bringing God to men"⁵⁰, making Him known and living in His endless love, they will be able to share his grace, namely mediated by the ecclesial institution.

4.2.2 Ecclesiological dimensions

Initiated and undertaken by the Church – for "the purpose of our struggle is to help [those who do not believe] to save themselves" (St. John Chrysostom) – any missionary enterprise will be able to materialize only by integrating the new members into the Body of the One to whom they belong and after which they aspire incessantly, as God Himself "wants all men to be saved and to the knowledge of the truth to come" (I Timothy 2, 4), Therefore, the ecclesiological dimension of the Orthodox mission will be a decisive one, for only in the Church, that is, "where the true Scriptures and the true interpretations are located, as well as all the true teachings"⁵¹, the faith becomes effective, concrete, applied, being able to assert itself as "much more valuable than the perishing gold" (I Peter 1: 7) and implicitly manifesting the sanctifying valences (Acts 26, 18) and saving (I Peter 1: 5) with which the Holy Scripture credits it.

a) Constituted as the mysterious body of Christ - *soma Hristou*, *corpus Christi* (Ephesians 1, 22 - 23) and temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6, 19) and, through this, "encompassing itself in the incarnate hypostasis of Christ" and reflecting both His deity and humanity⁷⁹³, the Church is, above all, a divine-human body, a theandric institution, a quality by virtue of which it is situated "in the center of the world" and acquires "a whole new existential dimension", from the perspective of which it hypothesizes something of the "life of the age to come", thus representing "an icon of the kingdom to come."⁵² The Church will therefore take the divine-human image of

⁵⁰ Pr. conf. dr. Constantin Coman, *Duhul misionar al Bisericii Ortodoxe*, în vol. *** *Biserica în misiune...*, pp. 336 – 337.

⁵¹ Tertullian, *Despre prescripția contra ereticilor*, XVI, 3, în *PSB*, vol. 3, trad. Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, Eliodor Constantinescu, Paul Papadopol and prof. David Popescu, Introducere, note și indici de prof. Nicolae Chițescu, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1981, pp. 150 – 151.

⁵² Origen, *Despre principii*, Cartea întâia, II, 6, în *PSB*, vol. 8, trad., studiu introductiv, note, de Pr. Prof. T. Bodogae, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., Bucharest, 1982, p. 94.

Christ the Savior, thus assuming, like Him, "two natures, two beings [and] two inseparable and special works in the same time"⁵³, in its space the human being ascending anticipatively to God and meeting Him with each Eucharistic ministry. Therefore, entering and becoming a human part of the ecclesial institution, man re-enters the "sacramental communion with God through Christ and in the Holy Spirit"⁵⁴ to whom he apathizes by his very origin and vocation. Thus, the Church puts before the world the "new covenant-relationship of God with people in Christ Jesus", a connection "sealed with the blood of the sacrifice on the cross of Christ the Savior"⁵⁵ and which, fructified by each of us through a faith made working in good deeds through love, will allow us, at the horizon of the eschatological future, to re-enter the "infinity of divine love", which, in the Church, it "radiates upon us and in us by the person of the Spirit."⁵⁶.

Thus, it is the theandric of the Church that, in the last instance, provides it with the determining role in practically all plans of religious faith and practice, starting with the cognitive one and ending with the soteriological one, giving it at the same time, the unique quality of "pillar and foundation of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15), of the truth that belongs both to the Father (Psalm 30:5), to the Son (John 1, 14) and the Holy Spirit (I John 5: 6). In fact, the Church belongs to God, being His Church (I Corinthians 1: 2), His flock (I Peter 5:2), His field (I Corinthians 3: 9), and last but not least. Israel's new Israel, Israel unbroken (Galatians 6, 16). It is the "work of the Holy Trinity", its ultimate source being "the very communion of the Holy Trinity"⁵⁷, the one that "is shared with it and with which it stands in unity"⁸⁰². Then, the Church is "the harbinger of the living God"⁵⁸, the one who reveals Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in her works and the one who, living between already and not yet, foreshadows the eschatological eon, "reserving the kingdom of the Lord for her sons"⁵⁹.

Finally, in the context of the Seminary in Bucharest, a series of proposals were discussed and formulated, explicitly intended to assume and concretize some measures and

⁵³ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, p. 217.

⁵⁴ John Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ Christos Yannaras, *Abecedar al credinței*, p. 153.

⁵⁶ Preot Prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, Ediția a doua, vol. 2, p. 138.

⁵⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ion Bria, *Tratat de teologie...*, p. 158.

⁵⁸ Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁹ Sf. Ciprian, *Despre unitatea Bisericii ecumenice*, VII, în *PSB*, vol. 3, trad. Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, Eliodor Constantinescu, Paul Papadopol și prof. David Popescu, Introducere, note și indici de prof. Nicolae Chițescu, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1981, p. 439.

steps aimed at supporting the process of "liturgical renewal" and, at the same time, strengthening the capacity of the Church to highlight the unconditional centrality it grants to the Eucharistic ministry. Among the proposals thus advanced, Father Ion Bria retains and presents synthetically the following:

In this way, by continuously affirming its Eucharistic dimension and implicitly attesting its defining Christological and Pneumatological openings, the Church will constitute itself, through its sacramental ministry, in a paradoxical synthesis of divinity and humanity, of transcendence and immanence, of personalism and communitarian spirit, by virtue of which it will be able to oppose the "nihilistic ontological collapse of the postmodern man".⁶⁰, restoring his divine face and guiding him to rediscover his deepest vocation and aspirations. Thus, by bringing and sharing God with people, the Church will find itself, as the German Lutheran theologian Jrgen Moltmann said, in a position to "represent the crown of society", so that it will be able to act as such.

Conclusions

Thus, the Church will find itself, alone, in possession of the answers to the "metaphysical" problems that agnosticism raises and which, being unable to solve them, it abandons, making this gesture its true dogma. The Church, however, will perceive the "creed" of agnosticism only as a simple assumption, unsustainable, including from the point of view of reason, as fully evidenced by the veracity, coherence and theological viability of natural revelation, for even "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the making of His hands proclaims it the strength" (Psalm 18: 1). To its uncertainty, to its inability to intuit God in the harmony and greatness of the Cosmos, in the turmoil of history or even in the intimacy of each of us, the Church will oppose the security brought by the divine revelation, by the very word of God, the true one (John 17: 17), perfect (Parables of Solomon 30: 5) and eternal (Psalm 118, 89), the word we cannot fail to hear (Isaiah 1, 10, Jeremiah 7, 1 – 2) and which we must appropriate (I Thessalonians 2: 13) and protect ("In my heart I have hidden Your words, lest I offend you..." – Psalm 118, 11).

⁶⁰ Pr. prof. univ. dr. Valer Bel, *art. cit.*, p. 35.

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