



Apophaticism or Analogy in Anselm's Argument? Paul Evdokimov's Contribution to *La Nouvelle Théologie* and the Nature-Grace Debate

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In June 1959, a few months after Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council, an assembly of theologians, philosophers, and historians met for an academic conference at the Abbaye Notre-Dame du Bec on the millennial of its foundation. Their purpose was to reevaluate the writings of a medieval theologian who had been that monastery's abbot in the eleventh century: the great Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm's famous ontological argument for God's existence had been somewhat neglected since Kant dismissed it on logical grounds in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Renewed interest in the argument, Anselm studies, and medieval thought in general had become an important pillar of the *ressourcement* project taking place in Roman Catholic theology at the advent of Vatican II. Cardinal Domenico Tardini, John XXIII's Secretary of State, wrote to the conference participants on June 11th of that year:

“His Holiness congratulates you with fatherly joy at this happy initiative. With a glad heart, He wishes upon all who take part in this Anselmian Congress an abundance of divine light and fruitful labor, and confers upon them the Apostolic Benediction.”¹

The list of speakers at this conference included such monumental figures as Henri Bouillard, Jean Chatillon, Joseph de Finance, Henri de Lubac, Palémon Glorieux, Yves Congar, and Jean Leclercq—a quorum of the group whose thought would become known as *La Nouvelle Théologie*, and who would profoundly influence the Second Vatican Council. Among these great minds was the Russian Orthodox émigré theologian Paul Evdokimov from the *Institut Saint-Serge* in

¹ Card. Domenico Tardini, *Letter of 11 June 1959 to Dom Grammont, Abbé du Bec*, in *Specilegium Beccense I* (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin: Paris, 1959), p. 1.x “Sa Sainteté se réjouit donc paternellement de cette heureuse initiative et vous en félicite. C'est de grand coeur qu'Elle invoque sur tous ceux qui prendront part à ce Congrès Anselmien l'abondance des divines lumières et qu'elle leur accorde, en gage de fructueux travaux, la Bénédiction Apostolique implorée.”

Paris, whose presentation on "The Apophatic Aspect of Anselm's Argument" is as suitable an introduction to his own thought as it is to his influence on the Catholic *Nouvelle Théologie* movement. The purpose of the present study is to analyze the ideas Evdokimov presented at Bec in 1959, and observe their influence upon mid-twentieth century Catholic thought, most particularly the Cistercian spiritual writer Thomas Merton, one of the most important monastic theologians of the Vatican II era in the United States. Evdokimov's influence on Anselm studies will then be placed in the wider context of the substantial influence that the *Saint-Serge* faculty exerted upon conciliar and post-conciliar Catholic thought.

Evdokimov's Appropriation of Anselm

At first appraisal, Anselm of Canterbury's theology does not seem the ideal candidate for a meeting point of Orthodox and Catholic minds. Martin Grabmann, the great historian of medieval thought, called him "The Father of Scholasticism," and his ontological argument, the standalone *unum argumentum* of the *Proslogion*, seems to be the ultimate assertion of rationalism in the West.² Evdokimov himself speaks out against Anselm's juridical satisfaction theory of atonement in *L'Orthodoxie*, calling it "foreign to eastern thought."³ Yet he saw within the language of the *Proslogion* an opportunity to renovate Anselm's ontological argument against an overly rational interpretation, which had failed in the modern era when Immanuel Kant's premises about the argument were accepted, both by its opponents and its defenders.⁴

Anselm had originally argued that God was "that than which a greater cannot be thought" (*id quod nihil maius cogitari possit*), and that it was better to exist than to not exist: therefore God must exist. In the work *On Behalf of the Fool (Pro Insipiente)* by Anselm's contemporary Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, Gaunilo critiqued Anselm's argument with a *reductio ad absurdum*, on the grounds that the term "God" in the argument could validly be replaced by a perfect island,

² Martin Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), pp. 271-72.

³ Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, trans. Jeremy Hummerstone (New York: New City Press, 2011, orig. 1959), p. 333.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008). Kant famously argued that "existence" as a predicate adds nothing to the essence of a being (e.g., God); therefore, there is nothing intrinsically better (or even different) about God's existing in reality as opposed to God's existing in the mind alone. This argument corresponds to Kant's transcendental idealism, which holds the cognitive level of reality as the only subjectively accessible realm, and as such the only realm under the purview of philosophy.

but that it would not prove the real existence of the island. In other words, Gaunilo argued, *id quod nihil maius cogitari possit* is not the sort of thing that can be held in the mind, but is rather only a verbal phrase. Therefore, it is fruitless to argue from the presence of this concept in the mind to the presence of God in reality. Kant's critique of Anselm is similar to Gaunilo's in that he agrees that it would be greater for something to happen in reality than in the mind alone. However, he disputes that existence is something which happens (a predicate). Rather, it is a term about the nature of a thing. Thus he can make Anselm out to be saying "God exists, because to exist most truly is to be God most actually." Under these terms Anselm's proof would be unsatisfactory, because it would require a further premise to demonstrate that God must actually exist. This critique by Kant came to dominate subsequent scholarship on the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. To be sure, several Catholic theologians and philosophers wrote in defense of the eleventh-century scholastic, but the Kantian school dominated the field until the renovation of Anselm's philosophy in the conciliar era, for which the Anselmian Congress can be called a programmatic debut. To oppose the prevalence of Kant's perspective, Evdokimov brought a new evaluation of Anselm to the Congress at Bec: a perspective which integrated and harmonized Anselm with Eastern theologians like Gregory Nazianzus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, John Damascene, and Gregory Palamas. By skillfully highlighting the ways in which Anselm employed an apophatic method, Evdokimov is unexpectedly able to call the ontological argument "possibly the last time East and West experienced such evident confluence."⁵

The *accessus* to Evdokimov's interpretation of Anselm lies in an article by the Thomist Étienne Gilson, who influenced Evdokimov just as Evdokimov influenced the later Catholic theologians.⁶ Gilson was the first to rescue the ontological argument from an overly-mystical and an overly-philosophical treatment by Dom Anselme Stolz and Kant, respectively.⁷ Giving a new perspective on the topic, Gilson argues that Anselm's argument corresponds with a sort of "Christian gnosis" that originated with Clement of Alexandria, wherein true knowledge of God is made possible through love by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Evdokimov takes Gilson's interpretation in an apophatic, non-rational direction, laying out eight of his own ways in which Anselm's argument can be read apophatically:

⁵ Evdokimov, "L'Aspect Apophatique de L'Argument de Saint Anselme," in *Specilegium Beccense I* (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin: Paris, 1959), p. 257.

⁶ Étienne Gilson, "Sens et nature de l'argument de saint Anselme," in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Age* (1934), pp. 5-51.

⁷ Cf. Anselme Stolz, *Zur Theologie Anselms im Proslogion*, in *Catholica*, (Paderborn, 1933), pp. 1-24.

- (1) *Credo ut intelligam* (from the *Proslogion*) means that rational arguments are inaccessible without divine illumination. Acceptance and understanding of reason presupposes a non-evidentiary faith in Reason Himself.
- (2) Anselm does not speak like a logician, considering some contents of thought are independent of the “logical envelope.” Whereas Kant sees no difference between idea and object, thus criticizing Anselm for trying to prove existence as a predicate of God, Evdokimov notes that Anselm affirms the miraculous presence of God even in man’s ideas of Him, because knowledge itself is in some ways a supernatural event.
- (3) If Anselm’s argument is taken only logically, it would come up against the problem that it focuses on existence, but does not engage the meaning of “existence.” When taken apophatically, however, it is easy to see the *via negativa* in Anselm’s assertion that God cannot be thought of as *non-existent*.
- (4) The divine truth of God’s essence is transcendent, even above logic, and therefore cannot be logically binding on man. Thomas Aquinas himself points this out as the reason why the ontological argument cannot be one of his *quinque viae* (five logical proofs for God’s existence).
- (5) The only reason the ontological argument works for God, and not for creatures, is God’s unique transcendence; hence, Gaunilo’s island cannot replace God as demonstrandum. Man can access this transcendence only by turning within his own soul and experiencing a longing for something that human reason lacks, a darkness whose *unknowable* content paradoxically illuminates all that man can know.
- (6) God can only be known as revealed. In Anselm, the name “*Dieu*” is already a theophany, a revelation to human logic that, by logic’s own rules, *nihil est maior Deo*. This assertion, that comparison of lesser and greater implies a greatest, is refined by Thomas Aquinas’ fourth argument *ex gradibus*. And as Bonaventure wrote, *si Deus non est, deus est*.⁸ Such an

⁸ This appears to be Evdokimov’s corollary reading (by *modus tollens*) of Bonaventure’s actual statement from *Quaestiones de Mystero Trinitatis* I, i, 29: *Similiter argui potest: si Deus est Deus, Deus est; sed antecedens est adeo verum, quod non potest cogitari non esse; ergo Deum esse est verum indubitabile*. In *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera omnia*, edita studio et cura PP. Collegii a S. Bonaventura, ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 10 vol. (1882-1902) vol. 4, p. 48.

idolatrous *deus* can be seen in the many “absolutes” which have arisen when human reason has tried to comprehend divinity. It is found in Plato's forms, Hegel's *Geist*, Husserl's “world of essences,” Fichte's “absolute I,” Spinoza's absolute nature, Marx's absolute society, the absolute matter of the materialists, and the terrestrial paradise of the utopians. The most emblematic idol is Sartre's absolute liberty, because the self becomes *deus*. As Karl Barth pointed out, to say *Deus* and mean *id quo nihil est maior* is already an act of faith.

- (7) If God is merely a being among other beings, He could not exist as God. God is therefore above all logical affirmation or existence, but all true logical affirmation receives its truth only from His being. Kant attacks a version of the ontological argument that follows from an assumed first premise, $A = A$. Yet Anselm does not begin with relative identity between creatures. Anselm's argument assumes the first premise of creation's participation in God for its *esse*.
- (8) The rebuttal of “Gaunilo's island” is prefaced by the assumption that God can be the content of a thought. Thus a *via positiva* interpretation of Anselm would indeed be subject to Gaunilo's criticism. Rather, Anselm must be speaking negatively, stating that no logical thought can possibly say that God does not exist, because God's being could not underlie such a thought (due to its falsity).

Evdokimov himself admits that these aspects arise less from a historically critical reading of Anselm's text, and more from a philosophically conscious interpretation of it. In other words, Anselm himself may not have identified these features of his text, but if his own arguments are followed to their logical conclusions, they intersect with the arguments of more traditionally apophatic Greek theologians, such as Gregory of Nyssa or Pseudo-Dionysius.⁹ These apophatic aspects Evdokimov identified boil down to three essential categories, which, taken as a whole, render his *Proslogion* an apophatic work. These are: (1) the inadequacy of human logic and language to speak of God in positive statements, (2) the primacy of faith as a key to understanding

⁹ Recently, the philosopher J. Burton Fulmer has drawn similar conclusions about the *Proslogion*, not on a historical level, but with an eye to the philosophical ramifications of Anselm's affirmations. Cf. J. Burton Fulmer, “Anselm and the Apophatic: Something Greater than Can Be Thought,” *New Blackfriars* (89:1020), 2007. For historical comments and speculation about Anselm's apophatic Greek influences, cf. Giles E. M. Gasper, *Anselm of Canterbury and His Theological Inheritance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 119, 127.

God's existence, and (3) the need for a passive, contemplative method for understanding God in a personal (not just abstract) way. God's name is at the center of all these categories, given that God can be named yet still not fully comprehended, His name serving only as a limitation of what He cannot be, i.e., non-existing. Evdokimov points out that Anselm's approach is on a personal level, and the *Proslogion* should not be read as symbolic logic divorced from the subject (Anselm) who speaks of God. Rather, Anselm is only able to make his argument because the arguer is himself, the believing subject. Anselm accepts rational *logos* and considers the name of God intimately tied to logic itself. Without this affirmation, Anselm would only be another fool who does not understand because he does not believe. Evdokimov considers this personal response to God just as vital to the validity of Anselm's argument as the logical premises that can be extracted.

Once he has schematized these reasons, Evdokimov seeks to find a parallel structure between Anselm and the apophatic thought of the Eastern fathers. Here the Russian theologian's profound understanding of Greek Patristics comes to the foreground, and the first step he takes is distinguishing the identity of the Transcendent Absolute in Anselm, which is logical and can be known, from the actual essence of God Himself, which is trans-logical and impenetrable. Rather, the Transcendent Absolute is God as He reveals Himself, and through Whom, acting as *logos*, all is revealed. The need for apophaticism in any argument about God's existence is prefaced by the Cappadocian idea of God as *lampros gnophos* (luminous darkness), which appears as the reflection of God's glory in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*,¹⁰ as well as the Pseudo-Dionysian term "luminosity of silence," which Evdokimov cites from *Mystical Theology*.¹¹ This idea, according to Evdokimov, reaches its highest expression in the hesychastic theology of Gregory Palamas, whose distinction between the unknowable essence of God and the uncreated energies by which God is known and man is deified Evdokimov considers thoroughly Patristic, and essential to the idea of apophaticism.¹² Nothing at all can be affirmed about the essence of God, except that he is "Divine

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.*, PG 44:1001 B. Cf. *Orthodoxy*, p. 63 n. 53.

¹¹ Evdokimov cites the passage from the *Patrologia Graeca* as *Théol. Mystique*, I, 3; PG 3:997. "Au-delà même de l'inconnaissance jusqu'à la plus haute cime des Ecritures mystiques, là où les mystères simples, absolus et incorruptibles de la théologie se révèlent dans la Ténèbre plus que lumineuse du silence."

¹² *Orthodoxy*, 25 n. 19, pp. 180-81, *et passim*. Evdokimov was joined by most twentieth-century Orthodox theologians in drawing a necessary connection between apophaticism and the Palamite essence energies distinction. Cf. Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, eds. Chad Meister and James Beilby (Routledge, 2013): pp. 543-4 *et passim*.

nothing,” as John Damascene says.¹³ Thus, Anselm is compelled to follow what Evdokimov terms the apophatic principle: “we know only that He is—*oti estin*—not what he is—*ti estin*.”¹⁴

Second, Evdokimov constructs a similar paradigm for the human element of Anselm's Argument: an apophatic anthropology. “Deep in its own interiority,” he writes, “the human spirit discovers the personal presence of the Transcendent.”¹⁵ Man is the dwelling-place of God, the *microthéos*, and the image of God is hidden within: *Deus absconditus* in *homo absconditus*. Thus, when man truly knows himself, he truly knows God. This maxim applies not only to knowledge, but also to becoming. Within man is the latent potency to take on the being of God according to grace, a process called *theosis*. As Maximus the Confessor writes, presaging Palamas, “a man who has undergone the mystical energy of deification will be the same as God in every way, with the one exception of essence.”¹⁶ An apophatic circle of silence surrounds God, and He can only be revealed on His own terms. “God is not,” as Evdokimov points out, “made in our image.”¹⁷ He anchors these ideas of knowledge and divinization even deeper in the Patristic tradition by attaching them to Gregory of Nyssa's injunction that the spiritual man become “all eye,”¹⁸ and St. Macarius' instruction that the monk become “all flame.”¹⁹ Thus, the *capax Dei* is centered around the intellect, but also the identity, of the human person, with identity holding epistemic priority. Given this emphasis on assuming the attributes of God, the Palamite distinction between energies and essence (a departure from the Augustinian language of divine simplicity) becomes even more essential. This is why apophatic anthropology and apophatic theology are inseparable; both acknowledge the limitations of their endeavor to the boundaries of God's given revelation. Man can know God to the same extent that he can become God; that is, in full measure of the divine energies without ever penetrating the “luminous darkness” of the divine essence.

The boldness of so thoroughly eastern an appropriation of the erstwhile “Father of Scholasticism” places Evdokimov in quite the same circumstances as the other “renegade theologians” of *La Nouvelle Théologie* (only without any danger of Vatican censorship,

¹³ Evdokimov, “L'Aspect Apophatique,” p. 250 n. 13. Cf. John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa*, I, 4; PG 94:800 A-B.

¹⁴ Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, 61. Evdokimov cites Maximus the Confessor (PG 91:1229 C, 1224 B-C) as the source of this principle.

¹⁵ Evdokimov, “L'Aspect Apophatique,” p. 249.

¹⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, PG 90:320 A.

¹⁷ Evdokimov, “L'Aspect Apophatique,” p. 245. “Dieu n'est pas à notre image.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251 n. 17.

Evdokimov not being a Roman Catholic). His interpretation is a perfectly-fit response to the presentation by Henri de Lubac at the same conference, "Sur le chapitre XIV du Prosligion."²⁰ In his talk, de Lubac bemoaned the separation of theology from mystery, which he considered to have begun with Anselm and has continued until the present. He finds in Anselm an "échec" (frustration) at the shadows of the divine mystery when he tries to construct what de Lubac considers a doomed rational proof for God's existence. Evdokimov and de Lubac are both attuned to the same temptation of medieval scholasticism: namely, the loss of mystery and the inevitable errors that accompany excessive doctrinal definition. Yet Evdokimov's article manages to rescue Anselm from this critique by demonstrating the concordance between his ontological argument and the Greek Fathers.

However, in order to make this daring rescue, Evdokimov must bring to light a key discrepancy between eastern and western thought. For this reason, the case of Evdokimov on Anselm provides a clear picture of the "easternizing" tendency of the *ressourcement* movement feared by Pius XII in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*:

... the idea of giving force to a certain vague notion which they profess to have found in the ancient Fathers, especially the Greeks. The Popes, they assert, do not wish to pass judgment on what is a matter of dispute among theologians, so recourse must be had to the early sources, and the recent constitutions and decrees of the Teaching Church must be explained from the writings of the ancients.²¹

The same concern is even more expressly noted in the letter of five years earlier from Charles Journet to his fellow Thomist Jacques Maritain, where he laments the *Nouvelle Théologie* inclination to

put between brackets the conceptual formulation of maybe even the revelation but certainly the theology and philosophy we have received from the Middle Ages... and tries to rejoin the Greek Fathers to the extent that their doctrine is tacit.²²

Such a tendency, as Henri de Lubac details, has been alive and well in the Latin Church since the twelfth century, when the *ad fontes* practices of proto-scholasticism began to extend to Greek sources. Robert of Melun and Eberhart of Bamberg considered the utilization

²⁰ Henri De Lubac, "Sur le chapitre XIV du Prosligion," in *Specilegium Beccense I* (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin: Paris, 1959), p. 295-312.

²¹ *Humani Generis*, 18. < http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html> Although this passage refers to ecclesiology, its spirit can be taken to refer to non-western theology more generally.

²² Charles Journet, *Letter of 27 December 1945*, in *Archives de Cercles Jacques et Raissa Maritain, Kolbsheim*, cited in Aidan Nichols, "Thomism and the *Nouvelle Théologie*," *The Thomist* 64 (2000), p. 7 n. 13.

of Greek sources as “less authoritative,” a “prostitution of Catholic doctrine.” Thomas More would come to complain of a “Trojan faction” in his day which tried to stamp out Greek studies at Oxford.²³ In the twentieth century specifically, these reservations about “easternization” represent a very specific unwillingness to deviate from Neo-Thomist systematic theology after Leo XIII had more or less made it the official language of Catholicism with his 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. The Palamite assertion of apophaticism based on the utter transcendence of God's essence was extraordinarily difficult to square with Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of *analogia entis* and the beatific vision, which posits a hard distinction between man's analogical *capax Dei* on earth, and his perfected vision of God's essence in heaven. The divergence between apophaticism and analogy in *La Nouvelle Théologie* will be discussed in greater detail below. Evdokimov's Orthodox perspective on divine and human nature should be understood as an important voice in a Catholic debate centering around the natural and supernatural ends of creation. He does not positively embrace the position of Henri de Lubac in *Sur-naturel* (which will be discussed below), nor does he consider man to have both a natural and a supernatural end. Rather, he questions the assumption that a “supernatural end” is meant to directly intuit the transcendent essence of God, and he affirms that creation is wholly in tune with the divine energies. In this way, Evdokimov's Palamism allows for an apophaticism in which God's nature is both wholly immanent (through the energies) and wholly transcendent (in its essence).

Thomas Merton's Appreciation of Evdokimov

Before now, very little has been written on Evdokimov's direct interaction with *La Nouvelle Théologie*; the same is unfortunately true for all the Russian émigré theologians who were his teachers and colleagues at *Saint-Serge* in Paris, such as Nicolas Berdiaev, Sergius Bulgakov, John Meyendorff, Georges Florovsky, and Alexander Schmemmann.²⁴ Ideally, future research would continue the work of the present study, which has already evidenced one specific collaboration

²³ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol. 3, Trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 187-8.

²⁴ A notable exception being the recent article by Andrew Louth, “French *Ressourcement* Theology and Orthodoxy: A Living Mutual Relationship?” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Also, an older work detailing the activity of the Russian émigré theologians in Paris is Olivier Clément, *Deux passeurs, Vladimir Lossky et Paul Evdokimov* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985).

of Evdokimov and the Roman Catholic theological intelligentsia on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, namely on the topic of Anselm's *Proslogion*. The work of Evdokimov and the *Saint-Serge* theologians continued to influence Roman Catholic thought (and vice-versa) throughout Vatican II, where Evdokimov was an invited observer and is thought to have contributed to the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*.²⁵ Theological cooperation of the *Saint-Serge* school has become the principal fountainhead of Catholic-Orthodox ecumenism after the 1964 Conciliar Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Many prominent American Catholic writers have served to carry on this *Nouvelle Théologie* legacy of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, though perhaps none so widely-read and spiritually profound as the American Cistercian Thomas Merton. While reading Evdokimov in the very same year of the above-mentioned Anselmian Congress, Merton discovered in him "a real theologian—one of the few."²⁶ His reading of Evdokimov was to make an Orthodox impact on Merton's voluminous correspondence with *Nouvelle Théologie* figures and his *ressourcement*-style literary activity during and after the conciliar period.²⁷ Some have situated Merton as a central figure for the development of certain council documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* (especially the section on the avoidance of war), and certainly for the council's reception in the United States and Western Europe.²⁸

The apophaticism of Anselm's argument was Merton's entry point to Evdokimov's thought, and would remain a central theme in his consultation with other *Nouvelle Théologie* figures.²⁹ On September 12, 1966, he wrote to Hans Urs Von Balthasar: "It seems to me that, of all those who have been discussing Anselm these past few years, [Karl] Barth and the Orthodox P. Evdokimov have understood him

²⁵ Julia Marie Desilets, "The Woman and Her Mission in the Church," Unpublished Article, *Pontificia Universitas An Tommaso D'aquino Angelicum* (2013). Evdokimov first coined the phrase "We know where the Church is, but we should not presume to say where the Church is not." Cf. Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, p. 350. Its citation in Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's bestselling *The Orthodox Church* has made it a sort of "*subsistit in*" for twentieth-century Orthodoxy. Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 308.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Journal entry of September 18, 1959*, in *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 3: 1952-1960)*, p. 330.

²⁷ For an example of Merton's active intention to disseminate the ideas of Vatican II in America, cf. Thomas Merton, *Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and the Religious Life* (Audio Lectures 1963-65), Gethsemani Classroom Series (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).

²⁸ Ron Dart, "Thomas Merton and *Nouvelle Théologie*," *Clarion Journal* (July 2011).

²⁹ Former Archbishop of Canterbury and theologian Rowan Williams has emphasized the need for a full study of Thomas Merton's treatment of Anselm. Cf. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013), p. 75.

best.”³⁰ By this time, Merton had already spent almost a decade exploring Evdokimov's works, and had made the Orthodox theologian's explorations of monasticism and Divine Wisdom a major source for several poems, books, and articles.³¹ Though he began reading him in the late 1950's, unfortunately no direct communication between Merton and Evdokimov exists among his many extant letters to and from other *Nouvelle Théologie* figures, including those who attended the Anselmian Congress. However, much of Merton's interaction with these figures during the conciliar period revolved around Anselm, Evdokimov, and apophatic theology. A letter of August 24, 1959 to Herbert Mason is quite telling in this regard:

Look, if you think about darkness you will naturally get a tired mind. And if you think about it you put a kind of light in its place, that is what makes you tired. When it is dark, it is dark, and you go in the dark as if it were light. *Nox illuminatio mea*. The darkness is our light, and that is all. . . I like very much, for theology, people like Fr. Evdokimov at the Orthodox seminary [in Paris].³²

The parallels between Merton's reflections on illuminative darkness and Evdokimov's theology of *lampros gnophos*, along with Merton's mention of Evdokimov, confirm that Merton had been meditating on his work—possibly even his presentation at the Anselm conference from June of that year.

Merton's meditation on Anselm's argument was no passing phase in his thought. Seven years later in 1966, he published his matured thought as the academic article “St. Anselm and His Argument” in

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Letter of September 12, 1966 to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, in Br. Patrick Hart, ed., *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 312.

³¹ For instance, the seeds of Merton's 1963 poem “Hagia Sophia” (discussed in more detail below) can be clearly seen in a 1961 journal entry where he mentions Evdokimov's *Orthodoxy*: “Long quiet intervals in dark hours. Evdokimov on orthodoxy—once again, as I have so many times recently, I meet the concept of *natura naturans*—the divine wisdom in ideal nature, the ikon of wisdom, the dancing ikon... Faith in Sophia, *natura naturans*, the great stabilizer today—for peace.” Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. IV (1960-1963)*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 91. In 1965, Merton wrote a very positive appraisal of Evdokimov's writings on eastern monasticism, calling them “splendid and challenging.” Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1965), p. 337. His joke in this journal entry about being overweight—“As an ikon, I am not doing too well.”—recalls the language of Paul Evdokimov, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov: An Icon of Orthodox Spirituality*, orig. printed in *The Ecumenical Review* (April 1963), Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications Office, reprinted by Light and Life Publishing Company, Minneapolis, MN, 1988.

³² Thomas Merton, *Letter to Herbert Mason on August 24, 1959*, in William H. Shannon, ed., *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 263.

the *American Benedictine Review*.³³ This article exhibits the marked influence of both Evdokimov and the Protestant Karl Barth, whose programmatic 1931 book *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* he referenced in the aforementioned letter to von Balthasar.³⁴ For Barth, Anselm's argument "was never a side-issue," and a faith-centered systematic theology, not a recapitulation of scholastic rationalism, would form the center of Barth's later *Church Dogmatics*.³⁵ For Barth, revelation from God is the only thing that makes an ontological argument possible:

In this relationship which is actualized by virtue of God's revelation, as he thinks of God he knows that he is under this prohibition; he can conceive of nothing greater, to be precise, "better," beyond God without lapsing into the absurdity, excluded for faith, of placing himself above God in attempting to conceive of this greater. *Quo maius cogitari nequit* only appears to be a concept that he formed for himself; it is in fact as far as he is concerned a revealed Name of God.³⁶

Barth's treatment of Anselm's argument here is remarkably similar to Evdokimov's interpretation of the very name "*Dieu*" as a theophany. Evdokimov's reliance upon Barth's faith-based theology for his apophatic interpretation of Anselm led him to cite Barth as a major influence in his 1959 article.³⁷ Merton takes up Barth's and Evdokimov's theme of God and theophany in his own article, with heavy citation of Evdokimov:

Hence the Anselmian argument is "a mystical experience of the living and religious content of the word "*God*" because "the name of God is a theophany and the place of His presence." Thus God Who is "totally apophatic in His essence" is "totally and immediately perceived as being."³⁸

It is significant that Merton not only accepts Evdokimov's apophaticism wholesale, but also interprets it in a way that affirms the Palamite essence-energies distinction. In the passage Merton cites, Evdokimov only mentions God's "caractère essentiellement apophatique," which could mean simply that God is characteristically unknowable, but which Merton chooses to translate as being "totally apophatic in His essence."³⁹ This language is even more strongly

³³ Thomas Merton, "Anselm and His Argument," *The American Benedictine Review* 17(2), June 1966, 238-62.

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931), trans. Ian W. Robertson (New York: Meridian Books, 1960).

³⁵ Barth, p. 11.

³⁶ Barth, p. 73.

³⁷ Evdokimov, "L'Aspect Apophatique," p. 233 n. 2.

³⁸ Merton, "Anselm and His Argument," p. 253.

³⁹ Evdokimov, "L'Aspect Apophatique," p. 245.

Palamite than Evdokimov's. Here it is difficult to interpret the Catholic Merton within his own putative confessional boundaries.

Ryan Scruggs reads Merton's comments on Anselm down strictly Barthian lines; he sees Barth's primacy of faith over proofs as the key to understanding, among other points, Merton's openness to interreligious dialogue.⁴⁰ While this may be true, it fails to capture the most significant element of Merton's writings on Anselm: the apophatic principle he adapted from Paul Evdokimov. In support of this point, John F. Teahan asserts that Merton was "the major representative of [apophaticism] in recent Western Christianity."⁴¹ Although this is an accurate appraisal, and Teahan's article "A Dark and Empty Way" provides good insights into certain aspects of Merton's apophaticism (such as luminous darkness), it mentions neither Anselm, nor Barth, nor Evdokimov—an inexcusable omission which calls Teahan's very narrative into question. For Barth's thought was famously incommensurable with the aforementioned *analogia entis* of Thomas Aquinas, to which Evdokimov opposed the Palamite doctrine:

I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.⁴²

Barth rejected Aquinas' understanding of God's essence, and the famous *maior dissimilitudo* of Lateran IV, because he thought it disregarded the divinely transcendent in favor of a strictly natural theology.⁴³ Such a connection, especially as it pertains to Anselm, intimates Barth's influence on Evdokimov and other theologians of the apophatic persuasion during the conciliar period.

La Nouvelle Théologie: Analogia or Apophasis?

Beginning only a few years after the publication of Barth's *Dogmatics*, studies appeared which contested his rejection of the *analogia entis*.⁴⁴ Since then, Barth's proposal has been commonly understood

⁴⁰ Ryan Scruggs, "Faith Seeking Understanding: Theological Method in Thomas Merton's Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:3 (2011), pp. 411-26.

⁴¹ John F. Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 58:3 (1978), pp. 263-87.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. xiii.

⁴³ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 43rd edition, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 806: Conc. Lateran. IV, Canon II. *Inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior dissimilitudo sit notanda.*

⁴⁴ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, for example, calls Barth's critique a "straw man" in his 1951 book *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), p. 382.

as one of the most contentious treatments of *analogia entis*, even compared to the Scotist and Palamite critiques of the same doctrine. It is beyond the scope of this study to draw broad theological conclusions about the knowability of the divine essence. Rather, this study is only an historical inquiry into major themes of *La Nouvelle Théologie* and the role of Evdokimov's apophaticism within that movement, especially its influence on Merton. Some scholars have noted that although the mid-twentieth century is often characterized as the downfall of Thomism, it is in fact the beginning of a new dialogue between Thomism and other systems of thought.⁴⁵ This is true as well for the encounters of Evdokimov and Merton with the *Nouvelle Théologie*, and their contribution has specific bearing on the Thomistic question of nature and the supernatural. Stephen Fields reminds us that the nature-grace debate is the "key to dialogue between *ressourcement* and Thomism."⁴⁶

Henri De Lubac's 1946 book *Surnaturel* is the earliest example of a systematic departure from the Neo-Thomist tradition.⁴⁷ De Lubac posited the supernatural character and *telos* of all creation, and denied any state of *pura natura* for humans. The Neo-Thomist separation of nature and grace had marked the theology of the manuals; De Lubac reacted against their tendency to describe the beatific vision as a *telos* of man that was disconnected from his life on earth. On earth, man was in a state of nature, with any supernatural grace being superadditonal; in heaven, this grace would become an ubiquitous "new nature." De Lubac feared that this separation would create a rift on earth between the sacred and secular spheres, one leading to earthly, natural fulfillment, and the other leading to a heavenly fulfillment beyond nature. There was no room for the idea of man's life on earth as supernatural in itself, except in an analogical way. This *analogia* was primarily *entis*, but also of other transcendentals: *bonitatis*, *veritatis*, *puchritudinis*.⁴⁸ To the chagrin of Thomists such as Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange and Charles Boyer, De Lubac interpreted "nature" such that the deeper one delved into it, the closer, not the further, one would come to the supernatural. The supernatural need not be defined as other-worldly, but as the deep inner core of the natural. De Lubac found this to be true for human nature as well.

⁴⁵ Cf. William F. Murphy, "Thomism and the *Nouvelle Théologie*: A Dialogue Renewed?" in *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 18.1 (2011), pp. 1-36.

⁴⁶ Stephen M. Fields, S.J., "*Ressourcement* and the Retrieval of Thomism for the Contemporary World," in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 356.

⁴⁷ Henri De Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (1946), nouvelle édition, ed. Michel Sales, S.J. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991).

⁴⁸ This point is most explicitly made in the article by Jean-Marie LeBlond, "L'analogie de la vérité: Réflexion d'un philosophe sur un controverse théologique," *Recherches de science religieuse* 34 (1947), pp. 129-41.

As he wrote in his book *Catholicism*, the advent of the perfect man, Christ, was “the revelation of man to himself,” and therefore “the supernatural dignity of one who has been baptized rests, we know, on the natural dignity of man.”⁴⁹ This point would be repeated almost verbatim in *Gaudium et Spes* (22) and later encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, finding its place as a controversial, but well-established aphorism in twentieth-century theology.⁵⁰

Hans Boersma has advanced a very categorical assertion of the *analogia entis* as the interpretative key to Vatican II and the nature-grace debate. Synthesizing the thought of many *théologiens nouveaux*, Boersma emphasizes the “sacramental” character of creation as both natural and supernatural, understanding *analogia entis* according to the *maior dissimilitudo* of its traditional formulation. He writes:

Let me articulate what I mean by my suggestion that creation was *merely* a sacramental participation in the divine life. The word “merely” alerts us to the infinitely great difference or dissimilarity that the Christian tradition wished to maintain between God and the world. Christian theologians referred to creation’s relationship with God by using the philosophical notion of “analogy of being” (*analogia entis*).⁵¹

Boersma cites Joseph Maréchal, the founder of Transcendental Thomism, as the first proponent of this definition. Maréchal resolved De Lubac’s dilemma between the natural and supernatural by appealing to the Thomistic principle of analogy, and corollary insufficiency of language. Boersma explains, “Maréchal believed that the doctrine of analogy provided him with the key to the relationship between nature and the supernatural . . . for Maréchal . . . the material order was essential for progress in the dynamism of the intellect towards the infinite. In short, it seems Maréchal arrived at an ontology that attributed a sacramental function to the created order.”⁵² Boersma adds the figure of Henri Bouillard, whose 1957 response to Karl Barth rescued Thomas from the Neo-Thomist tradition, which, beginning with Cajetan and Suárez, had misinterpreted Thomas’ doctrine of analogy as a direct, quasi-univocal correlation of natural and supernatural terms.⁵³ Boersma subscribes to the position of Maréchal and

⁴⁹ Henri De Lubac, *Catholicism: a Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 189.

⁵⁰ Guy Mansini, O.S.B., “The Abiding Significance of De Lubac’s *Surnaturel*,” *The Thomist* 73 (2009), p. 617.

⁵¹ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 70.

⁵² Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: a Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 66-7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Bouillard, and his synthesis of *Nouvelle Théologie* is essentially a renovated Thomism, bringing analogy into the foreground of each theological category: scripture (*analogia veritatis*), tradition (*analogia fidei*), and all creation (*analogia entis*).

The present study of Paul Evdokimov and Thomas Merton has provided an alternative “apophatic” perspective on nature and grace, perhaps not as prevalent in the conciliar era as the *analogia entis* model, but meriting historical attention. As Evdokimov wrote in *Orthodoxy*, “Nature is truly ‘supernature’, deiform and God-bearing in its very origins.”⁵⁴ Rather than an analogy which reveals God with a *maior dissimilitudo*, nature can achieve perfect union with the divine: “In the deified human being, the created person, by its very deification, is united to the deifying divine energy . . .”⁵⁵ Evdokimov even characterizes “the West” in the exact way that De Lubac and other Roman Catholics were moving away from: “In the West, human nature is taken to comprise intellectual and animal life, spiritual (supernatural) life being added to and even superimposed on the purely human economy.”⁵⁶ As has been shown above, this was not a fair characterization of *all* Western theologians, but it is significant that Evdokimov and De Lubac essentially agree that Neo-Thomism was problematic in its understanding of the supernatural. Evdokimov departs from De Lubac, though, in that he simply finds the Palamite essence-energies distinction to be the most faithful counter-understanding—as one might expect for an Orthodox theologian steeped in the Greek Fathers. That his was a minority position among Catholic theologians of the conciliar era should likewise be unsurprising.

Rather, the surprising discovery about *La Nouvelle Théologie* is to find one of its foremost American exponents, Thomas Merton, slipping into the use of Evdokimov's language. As has been shown above, Merton advances Anselm's argument for the existence of God in Barthian (faith-centric) and Evdokimovian (apophatic) categories. He even strays toward the affirmation of an unknowable essence in God, although he does not mention the name of Gregory Palamas or discuss the essence-energies distinction in his articles on Anselm. He does, however, express great sympathy for Palamite ideas elsewhere, such as in the chapter “Mount Athos” from his book *Disputed Questions* (1953). He explains that Palamas had received “very bad press in the West” and “has perhaps been treated too shabbily.” He explains:

⁵⁴ Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.

Gregory Palamas taught that the 'uncreated energies' of God could communicate themselves directly to men even in the present life (he rejected the idea of created grace). All these points are questionable and might seem, to Western Theologians, to be unacceptable. But perhaps we should not reject them without first having made sure we know what they really mean.⁵⁷

This affinity with Palamism is echoed in Merton's description of nature. Like Evdokimov, Merton holds a view of nature as essentially sacred, in potency for supernatural glorification. The divine wisdom of God, *Sophia*, is present within this nature, actively perfecting it. Evdokimov identified *Sophia* with the divine energies, and asserted that "Only Palamism, with its doctrine on the divine energies, allows for a correct Sophiology."⁵⁸ In Merton's 1963 poem *Hagia Sophia*, he names these energies "Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*." This medieval epithet *natura naturans*, "nature acting in its fashion," is the clearest answer Merton gives anywhere in his writing to the question of nature and grace. The echo of De Lubac's language ("the natural dignity of man") is apparent. Even more apparent, though, is the influence of Evdokimov and Merton's strong tendency toward Palamism (see n. 28). As has been shown in his treatment of Palamas elsewhere, Merton was not unaware of the tension between his apophatic sympathies and traditional "western" theology. His openness to this minority position made him a *rara avis* among the Catholic thinkers of his time.

Conclusion: Apophaticism and Ecumenism

Palamism and Thomism, in their various interpretations, need not necessarily be seen as adverse systems of thought⁵⁹, but certainly

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1953), pp. 77-8.

⁵⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *La femme et la salut du monde* (Paris: Casterman, 1958), p. 203. *Loc. cit.* and trans. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 160.

⁵⁹ Several books and articles have recently been devoted to the question of reconciling Palamas with Aquinas. David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, ed. Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013). Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Duncan Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theology* (Atlanta, GA: American Academy of Religion, 1997) and A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Gérard Philips, "Neo-Palamism," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Cranbury, NJ: Associated Univ. Presses, 2007), pp. 243-44.

lead to diverse theological models.⁶⁰ Likewise, consistent theological systems can be constructed whether nature and supernature are understood through *analogia*, or through *apophasis*. *La Nouvelle Théologie* and Vatican II represented the maturation of modern ecumenism in both a historical and an ecclesiastical sense, involving face-to-face meetings of theologians and public statements of church hierarchs. The conciliar period also witnessed an extensive ecumenical conversation on the metaphysical underpinnings of Christian doctrine. Where the fathers of the Greek East and Latin West seemed opposed, it was in fact their diversity which clarified the key questions of Christian metaphysics. *La Nouvelle Théologie* indicated that only by addressing these questions could the Fathers be understood and harmonized. The words of Merton himself frame this type of union quite well:

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians.⁶¹

Some may wish to accuse Merton (and others with his ecumenical sensibility) of a careless syncretism, which finds false unity in incompatible theological systems, “as if traditions were some sort of clothing.”⁶² However, Merton can no more be accused of syncretism than Evdokimov himself, whose article on Anselm was paradigmatic of an ecumenical theology: incorporating the ideas of both Greek and Latin fathers, without discrimination, to arrive at a deeper understanding of God in the Christian tradition. Although Evdokimov’s “apophatic principle” denied that God can be comprehended, he warns against “the mistaking of obscurantism for apophatic obscurity.”⁶³ Though God’s essence cannot be perfectly known, it is still the *natura naturans* of humankind to attain union with the divine. Disunity among humans, and also between humans and God, arises from the overconfident assertion that one metaphysical system is a perfect, timeless

⁶⁰ On the potential compatibility of Palamism and Thomism, cf. Antoine Lévy, O.P., “The Woes of Originality: Discussing David Bradshaw’s Aristotelian Journey into Neo-Palamism,” in, Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Divine Essence and Divine Energies* (Cambridge: The Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 2013), pp. 96-121; Norman Russell, “The Reception of Palamas in the West Today,” *THEOLOGIA* 3 (2012), pp. 7-21.

⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures*, 21.

⁶² This is Fr. Alexander Schmemmann’s private comment about a Trappist monastery in Massachusetts that practiced Buddhist spirituality and meditation. One wonders what he would have thought about Thomas Merton’s diverse theological interests, and later exploration of Buddhism. *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973-1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 183.

⁶³ Evdokimov, *Orthodoxy*, p. 31.

expression of divine truth. Apophaticism recognizes man's place as one of simultaneously perfect oblivion of the divine, and perfect union with the divine. Perhaps the thought of Paul Evdokimov and Thomas Merton serves as a fitting metaphor: neither man ever met the other, yet together, the unity of their thought was a significant contribution to the nature-grace debate in the conciliar era.

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