
*Eirini Artemi**
(Hellenic Open University, Athens)

**ORTHODOXY GNOSIOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY
OF THE TRIUNE GOD IN NICHOLAS' BISHOP OF
METHONE WRITINGS**

*Introduction: Gnosiology – Ontology a general approach
1. Gnosiology*

The gnosiology – the study of knowledge is not a subject that only scholars deal with. The term is derived from the Ancient Greek words *gnosis* «knowledge» and *logos* «word», «discourse». The Orthodox gnosiology is an attempt of every Christian to live according to the teaching of Christ and of his disciples. Apostle Paul underlines: «pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints»¹.

The scholar of Christian theology tries to find which the real gnosiology of God is. He based on the Bible, on patristic texts and the canons of Ecumenical and Local Councils. In the ancient gnosiology, there is an important question. If the names of things (including God's) are conceived of as an image of the transcendent universalia (realism, archetype). Nominalism accepts that the universalia are simple names and not beings as in realism². In the dialogue of Plato «Cratylus», there are two opinions about the names of beings. One supports Cratylus' view: «everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice applied to the thing, but that there is a kind of inherent correct-

* Dr Eirini Artemi – Theologist & Classical Philologist, Post Doc of Ancient Greek and Byzantine Philosophy of University of Patras, MA & Ph.D. of Theology of National and Capodistrian University of Athens, Lecturer in the Hellenic Open University, email: eartemi@theol.uoa.gr

¹ Eph. 1:18.

² G. Metallinos, «Faith and Science in Orthodox Gnosiology and Methodology», <http://www.romanity.org/mir/me01en.htm> [access 24/4/2016].

ness in names, which is the same for all men, both Greeks and barbarians»³. The other sustains Hermogenes' idea that any name «is any correctness of names other than convention and agreement»⁴.

As far as the gnosiology in the East Orthodoxy is delineated by the object to be known this is twofold: the uncreated and the created. Only the Holy Trinity is Uncreated. The universe is created. Faith is knowledge of the Uncreated, and science is knowledge of the created. Man was created to know God; not only to believe in Him and to hope in Him, but to know Him and so to love Him and to serve Him. Knowledge of God is the aim and goal of man's life, the purpose of his creation by God⁵.

In Orthodox theology, the gnosiology is symbolic. A distinction is made between the «essence» and «energies» of God. We can obtain knowledge of the divine uncreated energies, and not of the divine essence. God is unintelligible. The unintelligibility of God must be accepted by any human mind⁶. God is infinite and incomprehensible and everything that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. But all that we can affirm concerning God does not show forth God's nature, but only the qualities of His nature⁷.

The development of theology is based on the spiritual experience that is provided to the human being through the divine revelation⁸. The revelation of God to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and mainly to Moses is the first and basic knowledge – proof that a man can have for God's existence. For the Greek Fathers knowledge of God is an internal experience. It has as pillars the idea of communion, transfiguration and deification of man⁹. For Christians, the gnosiology can be defined in the phrase of «the kingdom of God is within you»¹⁰, because man can be led to a logical conception of Revelation of Triune God through faith.

1. Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality as well as the basic categories of being and their relations. The term ontology derives from Greek, with «on» meaning «being», and «logos»

³ Plato, *Cratylus*, 383ab. *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 12 translated by Harold N. Fowler*. Medford, W. Heinemann Ltd, London 1921.

⁴ Plato, *Cratylus*, 384d.

⁵ E. Artemi, «The knowledge of the Triune God according to Isidore of Pelusium», proceedings of The 12th International Symposium of Byzantologists Niš and Byzantium XII «CONSTANTINE, IN HOC SIGNO VINCES, 313 – 2013» 3-6 June 2013, (601-616), p. 605.

⁶ E. Artemi, «Gregory Nazianzen's trinitarian teaching based on his Twentieth Theological Oration», in *De Medio Aevo* 4 (2013/2), (127-146), p. 139, <http://capire.es/eikonimago/index.php/demedioaevo/article/view/92>.

⁷ E. Artemi, «The knowledge of the Triune God ...», p. 605.

⁸ E. Artemi, *The Triune God on the teaching of Isidore of Pelusium and the relationship to the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria*, Athens 2012, p. 327.

⁹ J. Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Boston 1978, p. 77.

¹⁰ Luke 17:21.

usually interpreted as «science»; so that ontology, as traditionally understood, is the science or study of being¹¹. The term ontology is often (but not always) treated (as here) as synonymous with metaphysics. The term «meta» in Greek means over, but it can also be interpreted as denoting behind or after; whilst «physis» translates as nature¹².

An ontological argument is a philosophical argument for the existence of God that uses ontology. Christian ontology is primarily concerned with the nature of the Trinitarian God. Ontology is especially relevant in relation to the Godhead since Orthodox Christians attempt to articulate how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the same substance or essence¹³. At this stage, it should be pointed out the distinction between ontological trinitarianism -what is the nature of God- and economic trinitarianism -how do the functions of the three persons of the Trinity differ. In Christology, the ontology, the very nature of being is examined between Jesus and God. The union of divinity and humanity in Christ is called the hypostatic union. This expression means that in the one, unique person, or divine hypostasis, of Christ, divine nature and human nature are united in such a way that they are neither changed, nor confused, nor separated, nor divided. Christ is one Person Who is both human and divine. One and the same divine person (or hypostasis) is the Son of God and the Son of Mary¹⁴.

Generally, the ontology is a branch of philosophy that examines the study of being or existence. The Christian theology entails an ontology, though not a philosophical ontology, since the normative Being is now New. Also it deals with the Trinitarian, Christological and Pneumatological teaching and the ontology of human being.

Chapter 1: Nicholas' of Methone life and theology.

1.1. Nicholas' of Methone life and the most important facts of his era

Nicholas of Methone was a major Eastern ecclesiastic theologian of the mid-twelfth century. He was born between 1115 -1120 and died in 1166. He was the theological adviser of the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus and was appointed bishop of Methone, in the Peloponnese and especially in the region of Messenia. His writings, as far as known, were polemical essays on the person of Christ, the Holy Eucharist, the use of unleavened bread, the procession of the Holy Spirit, against the primacy of the pope, but especially against the heathenish Platonism of Proclus. He published a detailed refutation of Proclus'

¹¹ P. Grenon, B. Smith, «Foundations of an ontology of philosophy», *Synthese*, 182. 2 (2011), 185-204, p. 186.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ R. A. Smith, «A Covenantal Ontology of the Triune God: An Attempt to Expound the Relationship between the Covenant and Ontology and Answer Richard Phillips' Criticisms of My Views», Published in www.GlobalMissiology.org "Trinitarian Study" January 2009, p. 35-57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 60, etc. About the Incarnation of Logos cf. E. Artemi, *The mystery of the Incarnation into two dialogues of Cyril of Alexandria, "On the Unity of Christ" and "on the incarnation of the Only-Begotten"*, Athens 1999.

Elements of Theology. He became concerned by the popularity of Proclus and acted as a defender of Christian Orthodoxy¹⁵. Nicholas was interested in Proclus' Neoplatonic categories and their influence on Christian doctrines. He commented on Proclus' use of specific philosophical terms (e.g. participation) and systematically criticized Proclus' inconsistencies. General, Proclus' philosophy was considered to be a source of heresies and a bomb in the base of christian doctrine¹⁶. Nicholas' treatise illuminated the nature of the conflict between pagan and Christian Hellenism¹⁷. He objected to heretical Christian teachings confused by pagan learning and his criticism of Neoplatonism was a reaction to the Christian Hellenism of the twelfth century.

In the beginning of Manuel's Comnenus reign, the emperor had to face the relics of the heresy of Bogomils¹⁸. The latter believed that whatever was visible, material world was created by the devil man's soul to have been created by God, but that all matter was invented by Satan, the elder son of God. As a consequence of their belief that the grace of God could not adhere to flesh - matter the Bogomils believed that Christ had only the appearance of a human body. They also rejected the Eucharist and other sacraments, as well as relics on the basis of their ties to physical nature. They also practiced a very austere asceticism, vegetarianism, and celibacy like the Cathari and Albigensians due to their hatred of their own fleshly bodies¹⁹. Generally they rejected the whole organization of the Orthodox Church.

So Manuel gave an order to Nicholas to write a treatise against this heresy. Nicholas urged the emperor to restore the unity of the Church universal²⁰. Finally, Nicholas was known for his writings and his fights against neoplatonic ideas and heretical teaching about the Holy Spirit and general for the Triune God and less for his life. The Orthodox Church honors him as saint.

1.1. Nicholas' Methone theology: Orthodoxy Gnosiology and Ontology of the Triune God

¹⁵ J. Matula, "Nicholas of Methone", in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. H. Lagerlund, publ. Springer Netherlands Heidelberg 2011, p. 881-883.

¹⁶ P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Comnenos 1143-1180*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, 332.

¹⁷ J. Matula, "Nicholas of Methone"..., p. 881-883.

¹⁸ «On 20 August 1143, in the first year of his reign, in the Patriarchate of Michael II Kurkuas, a Synod in Constantinople deposed and excommunicated two bishops of the diocese of Tyana in south – eastern Asia Minor – Clement of Sosandra and Leontius of Balbissa, convicted of Bogomilism.... Also on 1st October 1143, a monk, Niphon, appeared before a Synod in Constantinople, charged with preaching Bogomilism in Cappadocia», D. Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1948, p. 220-221.

¹⁹ J. Fr. Stearns, *Bogomilism: the great Bulgarian heresy*, Dissertation: Thesis (B.D.), Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago 1929, p. 55-90.

²⁰ *The Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology: A systematic work of Proclus Platonic Philosopher*, A critical edition with an introduction on Nicola's life and works by Ath. Angelou, publ. Athens Academy, Athens 1984, p. ix-xxiii, Liii-Lxiv.

Nicholas of Methone supported in his works the Triadology is the ontological underpinning and archetype of a true society and of genuine personhood, in the sense that the Orthodox Christian Trinity is the perfect combination and balance between existential otherness and communion. He explained that the platonic and neoplatonic ideas for God have no relation with the orthodox teaching for God. However, at the same time he adhered to that Christian and ecclesiastical Platonism which had been handed down from the Areopagists and others. Hence his doctrine concerning God is altogether ideal and transcendental. Nicholas considered the negative definitions of God as more correct than the positive. He regarded God as so infinitely above man that the latter can have no conception of him. So through negative theology he underlines that we gain knowledge of what God is not, rather than by describing what God is.

He tried to describe the difference between Knowledge and Being in Christian teaching and underlined that in neoplatonic thought being was not exactly unknowable, but it was available to the knower only qua object of knowledge²¹. He spoke about the Triune God who is one and Triune at the same time, but is not only one person²². He managed to have primarily sought to defend the theology of the Trinity against accusations of tritheism -the worshiping of three gods²³. So God exists as three persons or hypostases, but is one being, having a single divine nature. The persons of the Trinity are both eternally and simultaneously distinct as three persons. In other words, the Godhead has forever been, is now, and will forever subsist as three persons²⁴.

The persons or the Triune God are co-equal. Three of the Godhead are eternal implies that They coexist from eternity past through eternity future²⁵. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the one God, who has existed, created, acted, and sustained from the beginning. In His nature and activity, God cannot be grasped by human beings. Access to Him is only possible through faith. The one God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not a reference to three Gods, but rather three persons (hypostases)²⁶.

God is beyond His creation, He is also beyond the rational capabilities of human beings. The supreme antinomy of the Triune God, unknowable and knowable, incommunicable and communicable, transcendent and immanent is the primary locus of his apophaticism. Nicholas characterized the vision of God as impossibility but His attributes as possibility. God's existence is derived from man's knowledge of God's energies²⁷.

Nicholas' teaching had many common elements with Maximus the Confessor: «God has a simple, unknowable existence, inaccessible to all things and completely unexplainable»²⁸. The real God is the only source for the cre-

²¹ Ath. Angelou (ed), *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, 2.6-12, p. 5-6.

²² *Ibid.* 2.15-25, p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* 4.9-18, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 10.14-28, p. 13-14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Maximus the Confessor, *preface to The Church's Mystagogy*, quoted in John D.

ation, because He is real and almighty, he doesn't want any assistant from any helper- God²⁹. Bishop of Methone explained that to affirm an all-transcendent God is to affirm that God is the One who created all things out of nothing³⁰.

Nicholas supported that the God is the only infinite being. He is not restricted by space and time. He is unbounded and unlimited, unmeasurable or immense, unsearchable and not to be comprehended. This infinity chiefly respects and includes the „omnipresence“ and „eternity“ of God; these are the two branches of it; he is not bounded by space, and therefore is everywhere; and he is not bounded by time, so he is eternal. He is not constrained by the past, the present, or the future. His capacity is without end. His understanding has no limits. His presence is everywhere. The qualities and attributes He possesses are maximized in their perfection. His infinitude is understood in relationship to three primary attributes: omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. Simultaneously the Triune God is beyond any restriction, any end and any infinity. So Nicholas explained that there is no way to fully understand the vast greatness of God. So the infinity is the term man uses to describe something that cannot be counted or measured and God is surely immeasurable³¹.

Nicholas underlined that the God of Christians is personal. The God has a different substance and essence from the universe, which owed its existence to God's will and not nature. So the World possessed neither the eternity nor the true divinity of the God, but was rather made only by the God's permission and power. By this way Nicholas presented his disagreement with the neoplatonic teaching of Proclus and he clarified that there was no subject of pantheism in which that everything of the world was part of an all-encompassing, immanent God³².

So, The Father alone is the principle without principle (arche anarchos) of the two other persons of the Trinity, the sole source (peghe), root origin of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, therefore, takes his origin from the Father alone (ek monou tou Patros) in a principal, proper, and immediate manner³³.

The Son is co-eternal with the father. He is the only-begotten Son of God, equal with the Father. Just like the Son, there was no time when there was no Holy Spirit. The Spirit is before creation. He comes forth from God, as does the

Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Longman and Todd, Darton, 2004, p. 90.

²⁹ Ath. Angelou (ed), *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, 121.13-26, p. 127; 129.3-13, p. 139; 132. 9-24, p. 144; 132.27-133.12, p. 145; 134.28-135.2, p. 147; 140.13-31, p. 156; 140.3-8, p. 155; 140.13-31, p. 156.

³⁰ Chr. Terezis, «Nicholas of Methone and the Ploclu's opinion for Enads», *Hellenic Philosophical Journal* 5 (1988), 54-72, p. 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³² Ath. Angelou (ed), *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*, 136. 25-27, p. 151; 137.20-22, p. 151.

³³ Nicholas of Methone, *Πρὸς τοὺς σκανδαλιζομένους ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀποστολικαῖς ῥητοῖς τῷ «ὅταν δὲ ὑποταγῇ αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα, τότε καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Υἱὸς ὑποταγήσεται τῷ ὑποτάξαντι αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα» καὶ τῷ «ἵνα ἢ ὁ Θεὸς τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσι»*, *exégèse de I Cor. 15:28*, in. A. K. Demetrakopoulos, *Ecclesiastique Bibliothéque, Vol. A*, Leipzig, 1866, 293-320, p. 201-203.

Son, in a timeless, eternal procession³⁴. But temporal Spirit's mission is from the Son. Nicholas was against the teaching of filioque, the double source of the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son³⁵.

Generally, in his treatise about the procession of the Holy Spirit, Nicholas argued that the filioque distorts the Triadology by making the Spirit a subordinate member of the Trinity. Nicholas explained that the traditional Triadology consists in the notion that for any given trait, it must be either common to all Persons of the Trinity or unique to one of them. Thus, Fatherhood is unique to the Father, while begottenness is unique to the Son, and procession unique to the Spirit. Godhood, however, is common to all, as is eternality, uncreatedness, and so forth. He explained that the filioque created problems in the relations of the Triune God, positing that something can be shared by two Persons- i.e., being the source of the Spirit's procession- but not the other is to elevate those two Persons at the expense of the other. Thus, the balance of unity and diversity is destroyed³⁶.

To sum up the Gnosiology and Ontology of the Triune God according to Nicholas' teaching were based on the doctrinal teaching of the Orthodox Church. He followed the dogmatic steps of previous Fathers, the creeds and the teaching of the Ecumenical Council. He declared that the real God is one and at the same time three without having any relation with the God of neoplatonic philosophy³⁷.

Conclusions

Nicholas of Methone was the best known representative of the opposite camp or Neoplatonic thought of Proclus. He objected to heretical Christian teachings confused by pagan learning and his criticism of Neoplatonism was a reaction to the Christian Hellenism of twelfth century. Thought his texts the orthodox dogmatic teaching is represented. The real God of Christian is Trinity. One ousia, and the same time three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons and can be distinguished from one another [the Father is not the Son; the Father is not the Holy Spirit; and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. Orthodox Trinitarianism rejects belief in more than one or many gods (polytheism) in general and belief in three different gods (tritheism) in particular. Trinitarian monotheism, therefore, stands at odds with the various forms of dualism (two foundational deities) and the polytheism found in ancient. The God is God does not need nor does he depend upon anything outside himself (such as the creation) for his continued existence. Unlike all creatures, the source of God's eternal or everlasting existence is found within himself (self-sufficiency). As the only uncreated and uncaused being, everything else (the entire created order) depends upon his creative and sustaining power.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207 -225

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Chr. Terezis, «*Nicholas of Methone ...*» 54-72

He taught the existence at once of a Father: and of His Only-begotten Son, born of Him without time and flux and passion, in a manner incomprehensible and perceived by the God of the universe alone: The Son is begotten of the Father eternally and is never in any way separate from Him, but ever is in Him. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son: the object of equal adoration and glorification with the Father and Son, since He is co-essential and co-eternal.

The Father is without cause and unborn: He is derived from nothing, but derives from Himself His being, nor does He derive a single quality from another. Rather He is Himself the beginning and cause of the existence of all things in a definite and natural manner. But the Son is derived from the Father after the manner of generation, and the Holy Spirit likewise is derived from the Father, yet not after the manner of generation, but after that of procession. Further, the generation of the Son from the Father and the procession of the Holy Spirit are simultaneous.

Finally, the important part of Nicholas' teaching is his struggle against neoplatonic thought and underlined with emphasis that Christian God has no relation of God of Proclus. By his orthodox teaching, Nicholas was thought as the fervent defender of Christian Realism³⁸.

Ирини Артеми

(Грчки отворени универзитет, Атина)

ПРАВОСЛАВНА ГНОСЕОЛОГИЈА И ОНТОЛОГИЈА ТРИЈЕДИНОГ БОГА
У РУКОПИСИМА НИКОЛЕ; ЕПИСКОПА МЕТОНЕ

У раду се разматра доктрина Николе Метонског, водећег византијског филозофа XII века. Био је бранилац православне теологије против Проклових неоплатонистичких ставова. Његова доктрина о Богу је идеална и трансцедентна. Сматрао је да су негативни ставови о Богу тачнији од оних који су правоверни. Бога је посматрао као бесконачног и изнад човека, а разматрао је и суштину човека према Богу. Иако је у његовој доктрини Бог једнак бескрају, човек Га може спознати због његове инкарнације у триједином Богу. Објаснио је да је Свето Тројство уствари јединство и да заједно творе домострој и отелотворење, а да је само Христос отелотворен као Богочовек.

³⁸ V. Tatakis, *Byzantine Philosophy*, (in trans. from the french edition, E. Kalpourtzi-ed. and bibliographical updates L. Benaki), publ. Etairia of Studies of Greek Civilization, Athens 1977, p. 178.