

The Ultimate *Theomachia*:
Patristics Struggle against Gnosticism
as a Key of Understanding
Contemporary Integral Transhumanism

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The path of orthodox theology since the apostolic age can be compared to a journey that proceeds in the shadows along winding paths through the forests of words until it reaches sunlit glades, in which theological truth shines forth, dissipating the shadows and delineating with clear strokes what spiritual and ecclesial awareness had not yet come to express with shared and accepted words. Places of clarification are the moments when the truth of Faith finds its definition through dogmatic formulations, that is, when human speaking assisted by Grace come to circumscribe, as far as possible, the theological truth. Every path of theological elaboration constitutes then a *logomachia*, as the words produced by human reasoning collide with the impossibility of fully expressing the apophatic background of Truth; nevertheless on the ecclesial path, which is faithful to the principle of *koinonia* and finds its culmination in synodal gatherings, it constitutes a synergy with the Holy Spirit and arrives at expressing the theological truth and shaping orthodoxy, that is right opinion and right glorification. As St. Dionysius the Areopagite wrote, orthodox theology overcomes *logomachia* because the divine Grace grants man the “gift of saying, then saying well”¹.

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1. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, XIII, 4, 981C, in: B. R. Suchla (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum* I, Patristische Texte und Studien, 33, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin

Looking back at the patristic tradition, it is customary to repeat that the Church Fathers were able to apply the cultural tools of their time to their pastoral action, whose core was constituted by the defence of the truth of the orthodox Faith against heresies. For posterity, heresy clearly connotes what has been defined and condemned as such by the Ecumenical Councils, but when heresy surfaces on the stage of history as personal theological opinion, its claim pretends to be the same of the catholic-orthodox theology, that is, illustrating the theological truth and as such being aimed at Salvation. Accordingly, heresy results only when the Church, engaging itself in *logomachia*, sheds light on the failures of human reasoning backgrounding words that lack to be anything more than an imitation of the words of the theological tradition, but are far from expressing truth.

The history of heresies teaches us that the most dramatic aspect of the theological debates that requested the convocation of a council in order to be solved is the incapability of whom slipped into heresy to become aware of the unecclesiality of their understanding, missing to recognize that their words instantiated a false ontology, namely a non-existent state of things with respect to the Faith of the Church and to the common tenets of orthodox theology. The work of the Fathers consisted in discerning between the true and the false, between common Faith and falsifying mimesis, between ontologically grounded truth and mental constructions. Those who were acknowledged by the Church tradition as Fathers of the Church were able to understand the implications of heretical formulations and expose them not only as they have lost sight of the truth, but above all as they trace false paths, which contrasted to the salvific purpose of orthodox theology. This is why the Fathers defined heresy as *theomachia*, since it was not matter of a neutralgnoseological stance, but a deviation from the path to Salvation, which is the ultimate scope of theology.

– New York 1990, p. 230: «Ὡστε, εἰ μὲν ὀρθῶς ἔχοι τὰ εἰρημένα καὶ ὡς καθ' ἡμᾶς ὄντως ἐφηψάμεθα τῇ διανοίᾳ τῆς θεωνυμικῆς ἀναπτύξεως, ἐπὶ τὸν πάντων ἀγαθῶν αἴτιον τὸ πράγμα ἀναθετόν τὸν δωρούμενον πρῶτον αὐτὸ τὸ εἰπεῖν, ἔπειτα τὸ εἶπεῖν».

It should not be missed that the theological struggle to reaffirm orthodox Faith against heresies is contextually aimed at restoring the broken unity of the Church. Heresy in fact leads to the destruction of ecclesial unity, and therefore its condemnation cannot merely be considered as an outrage to the freedom of thought, as it is nowadays assumed according to secular thinking. Hence the ecclesial need for assessing heresies has always been triggered by the historical facts that have led to the divisions of the ecclesiastical body.

The orthodox theological *ethos* is based on the awareness that false ontology implies the absence of salvation. Against Apollinaris, who excluded that Christ assumed a rational soul, St. Gregory of Nazianzus clearly affirmed the principle of salvation as the ineradicable criterion of the orthodox theological thinking: “What has not been assumed, has not been healed”². Since salvation of every single man is the ultimate goal of the unending mission of the Church in the course of history on the whole earth, the oneness and unity of the Church, which define its ontology according to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, constitute the ecclesial criterion of orthodoxy on the basis of its historical and geographical oneness, as it is summarised in the remarkable definition formulated by St. Vincent of Lerinus:

In the Catholic Church itself, we must take into the utmost consideration the fact that we maintain what has been believed everywhere, always and by all (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*): this is indeed truly and properly Catholic –as the very meaning of the word and the reasoning indicate– that is, that which includes precisely universally all things³.

Accordingly, the catholic-orthodox Faith complies with unanimity (*ab omnibus*) and universality (*ubique, semper*): unanimity is the guarantee

2. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Epistulae theologicae*, 101, 32, in P. Gallay (ed.), Grégoire de Nazianze, *Lettres théologiques*, Sources Chrétiennes 208, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1974, p. 50: «Τὸ γὰρ ἀπρόσληπτον, τὸ γὰρ ἀθεράπευτον».

3. R. S. Moxon (ed.), *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lerins*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1915, p. 10: “in ipsa item catholica ecclesia magnopere curandum est ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est. hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum quod ipsa uis nominis ratioque declarat quae omnia fere uniuersaliter comprehendit”.

of a vertical bond with the Truth, while universality reflects this bond in the geographical and historical dimension. The Church is therefore the encounter between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the truth of Faith, while heresy is the rupture of ecclesial communion through the breach of the principles of *unanimitas* and *universalitas* of the catholic-orthodox Faith.

The history of heresies can be compared to a funnel that narrows as the sand slips into it. At the beginning of the Apostolic era, the most prominent heresy, i.e. Gnosticism, constituted a general challenge to the ecclesial path to salvation, opposing to its historical and earthly dimension a mythological comprehension of salvation. While Salvation according to the orthodox and ecclesial perspective is in fact incarnated in the life of the communities composing the communion of the one Church, salvation according to Gnosticism is fulfilled outside space and time and it is not conceived as communion but rather as an individual issue. As the historical and visible boundaries of the Church expanded, the cultural profiles of its members became more and more heterogeneous, consequently the theological language needed to establish a common ground to express the truth of Faith and Salvation. The choice of this common ground converged gradually on ontology, since heresies progressively insisted on the linguistic and ontological aspects of the theological doctrine, from intra-trinitarian ontology to the ontological background of the Incarnation, from the possibility to circumscribe divine nature by sacred images to the participation to divine energies, always and everywhere departing from the salvific dimension that was previously believed *ab omnibus, ubique, semper*.

On the path that led to the convocation of the seven Ecumenical Councils, *theomachia*, that is heresy as contradiction of the salvific power of Faith, acted from within the Church against the foundations of the ecclesial Faith, denying first of all the eternal divinity of the Word, then his humanity in the Incarnation, then the persistence of his divine action within the creation (denying firstly the image of the hypostasis of the Incarnated Word and subsequently divine uncreated energies), thus placing the salvific economy on a vacuous ontological basis, making of it a mythological representation, not fully embodied in human history

and ontology. But while the age in which orthodox Faith defined the ontological underpinning of its theology ended with the Palamitic Councils of the XIV century, at the dusk of the Roman-Byzantine age, *theomachia* has certainly not exhausted its action, working from within the ecclesial body and focusing on the Church as its new target, through the emergence and entrenchment of ethnophyletism, and, at the same time, producing on the external front the extreme developments of secularist anthropology, which is based on the denial of man as being made in the image and likeness of God.

If we look at these two fronts, we realise how both are constituted within a secularised humanistic vision, as even ethnophyletism does not stem from a poor understanding of the ontological background of theology, but rather from the intrusion of worldly ideology obscuring the understanding of the divine-human nature of the Church and forgetting that the kingdom of God is “not of this world”⁴.

The epoch in which we are living is as if presenting us with the funnel of theology turned upside down and its focus passed from core questions of Faith revolving around the understanding of divine nature and its salvific economy to concerns peripheral to the essence of Faith, giving rise to declinations of secularism in which the main concern is not the salvation of man, but the permanency of the material goods, the endurance of human institutions, the glory of nations, being all these issues the guarantees for the particular survival of the individuals in this world.

The theme of *theomachia* is widely attested in patristic literature, particularly in authors such as Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite⁵. The emperor-theologian Justinian uses this word in his invective against Origen⁶, taking a step that was decisive toward the distinction between

4. *Jn* 18, 36.

5. C. Pera, «Denys le Mystique et la ΘΕΟΜΑΧΙΑ», *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 25 (1936), pp. 5-75.

6. Flavius Iustinianus, *Edictum contra Origenem*, in: M. Amelotti – L. Migliardi Zingale (eds.), *Scritti teologici ed ecclesiastici di Giustiniano*, *Legum Iustiniani imperatoris vocabularium*. Subsidia, 3, A. Giuffrè, Milano 1977, p. 72; p. 104: «τὸν θεομάχον Ὀριγένην»; p. 96: «Ὀριγένης ὁ μανιώδης καὶ θεομάχος».

the cosmological background of the ecclesial being and the cosmistic conception surviving from pagan antiquity. With the condemnation of the pagan resonances of Origenism decreed by Justinian with his edict of 543 and by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), the Church highlighted the nature of *theomachia* as persisting rebellion against God by three forms: as rejection of the Gospel, as in the case of paganism, and as corruption of the right doctrine, as in the case of Gnosticism and heresies.

These three declinations of *theomachia* (paganism, theological heresy, and Gnosticism) remain relevant today, *mutatis mutandis*: this is why the solicitude with which the Fathers dealt with them must be taken into utmost consideration in order to understand their implications for human salvation in the contemporary social and cultural context. Just as the Fathers looked at the *theomachiai* of their time through the principle of analogy, recognising them as errors of the past returning in new forms, so we can look at the current declinations of *theomachia* by recognising them as new presentations of past tendencies.

Since early Christian era paganism consisted in the rejection of the Gospel and in the maintenance of the system of sacrificial violence, in subservience to the cosmic gods and to the influence of the demons, as it is well put in light by the evangelic narration of the encounter between Jesus and the Gadarenes/Gerasens, which is reported in the three synoptics⁷; contemporary paganism in turn consists in the reiteration of the sacrificial system, based on violence against innocent victims, who expiate the unending crisis of the secular society through their “tears and blood”—whether torn by war or economic austerity. Paradoxically this kind of society is rooted in the idolatry of material goods and, at the same time, on the overcoming of their limits, seamlessly experiencing their insufficiency to fulfil the wider range of human desires.

Heresy within the Church is today fundamentally an ecclesiological heresy, as we have already seen. This is the outcome of the influence of secular thought, triggering the comprehension of the Church as an institution of this world, vying for power, for amplitude of territory, for number of followers and so on.

7. Mt 8, 28-34; Mk 5, 1-20; Lk 8, 26-39.

Finally, the third root of *theomachia*, against which the Fathers have fought since the apostolic age, namely Gnosticism, constitutes the most elusive aspect. This fact can be explained by recalling that the Church has dealt with Gnosticism mainly in the era before Nicaea, when the historical dimension of the Church was much narrower than what it became after the Constantinian age⁸; consequently, the action of Gnosticism took the form of an external and sectarian factor with respect to the Church, which had a less divisive impact, although, judging by the concern of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon and other Apostolic Fathers, it has never been underestimated from the pastoral point of view. Moreover, Gnosticism constituted a trend, an intellectual orientation, crossing the thought of various authors, rather than the doctrine of a school, defined by a precise theoretical canon⁹.

Ancient Gnosticism can be summed up in its fundamental tenets as the placing of the cosmic necessity and determinism before human history and freedom of the will, as the conception of salvation as individual survival within the cosmic drama, and as the comprehension of God as a mediator within this mechanical universe. Gnosticism conceives transcendence as absoluteness, emphasising the dimension of the protological and eschatological unity of the intellects, which are the true protagonists of the Gnostic universe, to the detriment of the material cosmos. Transcendence is thus conceived as a monadic unity that does not presuppose otherness. Moreover, the history of salvation unfolds through knowledge, or better through noetic enlightenment. The most radical outcome of classical Gnosticism is the removal of the body from the cosmic economy, as it is conceived as an obstacle to the eschatological reunification of the intellects.

Although the threefold root of the *theomachia* that the Fathers faced during the Roman-Byzantine age, particularly during the first six centuries, acknowledged transcendence as part of the reality, their paradigm falls under the ancient cosmistic vision of the world, according to which

8. After Constantine, the Church progressively came to be identified as the universal way of salvation, which it is expressed symbolically by the Elevation of the True Cross after his founding by St Helen in the year 326 in Jerusalem.

9. See H.-C. Puech, *En quête de la Gnose. La Gnose et le temps et autres essais* I, Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines, Gallimard, Paris 1978.

the cosmos, ruled by necessity and cyclical revolutions, constitutes the sphere of wholeness, encompassing physics and metaphysics. Within cosmic harmony, according to the ancient paradigm of thought, it is ultimately the noetic side that prevails over the corporeal, in the sense that this latter is seen as unnecessary for salvation.

Contemporary *theomachia* responds to the same cosmistic criterion, corroborated by the physicalistic and materialistic vision enforced by hard sciences, and silently feeds the current orientations of secular thought. As a consequence of this vision, the entire discourse on transcendence is conceived as superfluous and ontologically insubstantial. Despite their ontological insubstantiality, which decreed their historical defeat, Gnostic systems reposed on the duality between the transcendent unity of the intellects and their fall into the material world, or between the principles of light and darkness in Manichaeism (which is an extreme development of the Gnostic system)¹⁰.

Due to the hegemony of the mechanistic worldview, which fundamentally is an upgrade of ancient cosmism, contemporary secularism has removed transcendence from its perspective on reality, but in this way, it become unbalanced with respect to the human innate aspiration to transcendence. Consequently, what has been left outside the door, comes back inside from the window. We have to see how this arrives and what does it imply.

Secularism and its materialistic orientation finds itself enclosed within the narrow limits of the cosmic mechanicism and the material reality of things, which the evolutionary and positivistic thought conceive as the effect of the laws of physics and the final outcome of the evolution of organic nature. Failing to give space to the ontological tendency of human nature to fulfil itself within Otherness, and particularly within the transcendent Other, who, being free from the constraints of cosmic being, is the only who could fulfil the human thirst for unending freedom, secularism finds its only chance of evolution into the tendency

10. See H.-C. Puech, *Le Manichéisme. Son fondateur. Sa doctrine*, Bibliothèque de Diffusion Bd. 56, Musée Guimet, Civilisations du Sud S.A.E.P., Paris 1949; A. Van den Kerchove – L. G. Soares Santoprete (eds.), *Gnose et manichéisme. Entre les oasis d'Égypte et la route de la soie. Hommage à Jean-Daniel Dubois*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses, 176, Brepols, Turnhout 2016.

to overcome the ontological limits of man, of the cosmos and of the laws of nature by resorting to the transforming power of technology.

The essence of technology as transforming power did not provoke theological and philosophical reflection until the moment when its effects on the global environment approximated the only model available to human imagination that glimpses its contours, namely the apocalyptic scenario. But the technological transformation of nature, which apparently did not imply until now any ideological purpose other than mere economical profit, shows nowadays its most sinister side since the transhumanist project has surfaced, presenting itself as a structured ideology, not concealing its nature as *theomachia*, that is a project aimed at improving mankind by overcoming its limitations, openly challenging both the evolutionist and creationist paradigms¹¹.

Transhumanism is born as a projection of medical improvements in the perspective of a utopian redefinition of the entire anthropological framework, in which the combination of grafting techniques for medical purposes go beyond the medicine's purpose of restoring dignified living conditions to the sick persons as far as possible, since they are not only aimed at preventing disease, even invasively, but at suppressing the same idea of disease by improving the human being itself with respect to the limits of his physical corporeity¹².

The transhumanist project thus surpasses secularised humanism, which denied that man is created in the image and likeness of God, and posits its project as the constitution of a new man in the image and likeness of a gnostic abstraction of humanity, characterised by the removal of his current supposed limitations, both mental and bodily. This removal has undergone a cultural and ethical propaganda, presented as aimed at defending human and civil rights, which has

11. On this topic see M. More – N. Vita-More (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader, Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2013.

12. On the ontological basis of the transhumanist project see the illuminating essay of A. L. Smyrniaios, "From Ontology to Ontologies to Trans-Ontology. The Postmodern Narrative of History and Trans-Theological Ludic Transhumanism", *Forum Philosophicum* 21 (2016), pp. 73-93.

been disseminated through social engineering and the omni-pervasive influence of mass medias. Finally it is has undergone a progressive technological implementation, the purest and most coherent realisation of which is Artificial Intelligence. With Artificial Intelligence we see re-emerging the atavistic Gnostic tendency that promises salvation through dematerialised knowledge, whose subject is no longer a being endowed with a body, but an artificial neural network extended on a global scale.

The body constitutes the ultimate obstacle to the Gnostic project of a biotechnological interconnection of the intellects, in which personal identity and personal will must disappear, in order for the individual to contribute to the global interconnection, figuring as a node in the network. Just as the Fathers defended the dignity of the body against Gnosticisms of their time, bearing in mind the salvific role of the Body of the incarnate, crucified and resurrected divine Logos, so it will be in the defence of the body against transhumanist pretended improvements, through deontology sanctioning the limits of experimentation and the application –maybe under the excuse of emergency conditions– of every form of technology to man, that we can contain the sinister thrust of the ultimate Gnostic *theomachia*.

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