

André Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology. An English Translation*, trans. Octavian Gabor, Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought 17, Piscataway, New Jersey, Gorgias Press 2016, 259 p., ISBN: 978-1-4632-0565-2

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Science and religion deal with complementary and, most of the time, with opposing anthropologies. While the scientific study of the human being, i.e. *anthropology*, has slightly clearer formulated statements and is more inclined to empirical inquiries related to human behavior, religious anthropology develops a specific understanding of the human being, independent of empirical studies. Christianity develops an anthropological theology based on biblical scriptures, but also through the resolutions of ecumenical councils, and theological writings. The dominant, general theological definition of man always follows two tenets: the doctrine of original sin and Christology. But a clear conciliar formulation of what is human nature *in itself* still evades dogmatic formulation.

This absence is to be compensated by scattered theological works dedicated to the theological nature of the human being. One of the outstanding systematic anthropological theologies on the human being is Gregory of Nyssa's *De opificio hominis*; the definition of man is drawn here from the doctrine stipulated by the *Genesis*, with a special emphasis on the image and likeness of the human being with God. Gregory of Nyssa also develops an apophatism regarding the human being, underlining the paradox of the epistemic abilities of the human being and the limits of the knowledgability of the essence of the human being. Not too many theologians followed suit. One of the outstanding attempts to formulate an apophatic anthropology is that of André Scrima (1925-2000). An atypical and exceptionally skilled theologian, with a background in philosophy (at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, University of Bucharest, between 1943 and 1948), mathematics, and medicine. He was part of a Hesychast movement – the so-called *Burning Bush* – who gravitated around Antim Monastery, Bucharest. He also served Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras (1886-1972) as his personal observer at Second Vatican Council (1963-1965).¹ Between 1968 and 1989, a monk at St. George monastery in Deir-el-Harf, Scrima worked also as a pro-

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¹ Michael Quisinsky and Peter Walter, eds., *Personenlexikon zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 2016), 249–50.

fessor at Saint Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon.² André Scrima's book under review here, *Apophatic Anthropology*, proposes a title made up by the term *apophatic* (which has a deep tradition in Christian theology especially due to the *Corpus Areopagiticum*) with that of *anthropology* (a term coined during the Renaissance, with a positivistic culmination in the twentieth century).

This book, translated for the first time in English, is an important contribution to the twentieth century exegesis on apophatic theological anthropologies.³ The translation brings to the English readership one of the few systematical and exegetical works of Scrima. This undertaking is due to Octavian Gabor, Professor of Philosophy at Methodist College (Peoria, Illinois, USA), who previously translated from Romanian into English a book of one of the most important Romanian philosophers, Constantin Noica (1909-1987).⁴ The translation is published in the series *Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought* (formerly *Gorgias Studies in Philosophy and Theology*), a promising collection of theological and historical exegesis of Gorgias Press, a publishing house dedicated to the religions of the Middle East. The publication of the volume in this series couldn't be more appropriate, as Scrima was a theologian with an authentic and articulated interest in Oriental Christianity and Religions.

The volume renders into English the unfinished study *Antropologie apofatică*⁵ (*Apophatic Anthropology*), elaborated by Scrima between 1951-1952; some parts thereof were the basis for a bachelor thesis⁶ defended under

² For the English-speaking scholars, only a couple of studies on Scrima's work are available, such as: Athanasio Giocas and Paul Ladouceur, "The Burning Bush Group and Father André Scrima in Romanian Spirituality," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 52, no. 1-4 (2007): 37-61; Marco Toti, "Religious Morphology, Hermeneutics and Initiation in André Scrima," *Il padre spirituale* (The Spiritual Father), *Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 11, no. 1 (2011): 77-97. See also the current *RES* issue dedicated to Father André Scrima, edited by Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban: *An Intellectual of the Church: Remembering Father André Scrima (1925-2000)*, *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 3 (December 2020).

³ See, for example, some of the twentieth-century discussions concerning the apophatic anthropology in John Saward, "Towards an Apophatic Anthropology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1974): 222-34. Saward revised the lineage of apophatic anthropology from patristic sources up to Wittgenstein. A more inclusive overview is that of Bernard McGinn, "Hidden God and Hidden Self: The Emergence of Apophatic Anthropology in Christian Mysticism," in *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, eds. April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson (Acumen Publishing, 2013), 87-100.

⁴ Constantin Noica, *Pray for Brother Alexander* (Punctum Books, 2018).

⁵ Published posthumously, André Scrima, *Antropologie apofatică*, ed. Vlad Alexandrescu (București: Humanitas, 2008).

⁶ The full title of the BA thesis is *Schiță a unei antropologii apofatice, în spiritul tradiției ortodoxe* [*An Essay on Apophatic Anthropology, in the Spirit of Orthodox Tradition*]; it was defended in June 1956 (the same year, one month later he became a monk). This bachelor thesis is

the supervision of Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993). The same text was at the core of a doctoral dissertation⁷ written for the Benares Hindu University in Varanasi, India, between 1957 and 1959. Even if the project remained unfinished, some of the chapters were completed. The book presents these scattered writings in two main sections: *The Apophatic Anthropology* (p. 1-161) and *Attempt to an Introduction to an Apophatic Orthodox Anthropology* (p. 163-176). The first chapter contains the only two sections of the intended book (which initially had nine sections) which were completed: *The Philosophical and Theological Significance of Anthropology* (p. 3-49) and *Theological and Anthropological Apophaticism* (p. 50-155). A small chapter ensues, i.e. *Homo Absconditus* (p. 156-161), which is the beginning of a section of the unfinished planned book. The second chapter brings together two texts: one from 1951-1952, and another one, also written for his BA thesis in theology.

Additionally, the volume includes some articles written in the same period of time, before Scrima left Romania (1956), which have been brought together with the title *Texts from the Antim Monastery* (p. 177-235). The source for the translation of this last chapter is André Scrima's posthumous volume published in 2008, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*.⁸ All these texts are exceptional since they were elaborated in a time when Romania's intellectuals were under severe Sovietization and persecution, with only a few surviving persecution, imprisonment or both. The reader will find very helpful the *Preface* (p. VII-XII), signed by Vlad Alexandrescu (the Romanian editor of the original text), and Octavian Gabor's *Translator's Notes* (p. 237-245). These notes are important editorial and philological clarifications for the scholar who is not familiar with the original Romanian texts.

Most probably Scrima's attention for apophatic theology during the 1950s comes from Dumitru Stăniloae's similar interests. But Scrima had a particular interest precisely in human apophatism and attempted to elaborate a systematic theology of the apophatic condition, in a way that few other Eastern Orthodox theologians did. According to Scrima, western culture is tributary to two types of anthropologies: one originating in Greek culture, where the human being is defined by *reason*, and a second one developed by Christianity, where the human being is understood through the incarnated

the second defended by Scrima; his first thesis was towards acquiring a degree in philosophy (1943-1948), the thesis entitled *Logos and Dialectics in Plato*, under the supervision of Anton Dumitriu (1905-1992), for whom Scrima was an assistant from 1946 to 1948.

⁷ The title of the unfinished doctoral thesis is: *The Ultimate: Its Methodological and Epistemological Connotation according to Advaita Vedānta*.

⁸ André Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, ed. Vlad Alexandrescu, Romanian translations by Vlad Alexandrescu, Lucian Petrescu și Miruna Tătaru Cazaban (București: Humanitas, 2008).

logos.⁹ The incarnated *logos* should not reflect only Christ's suffering on the cross, but also as the specificity of humanity. Scrima proposes an alternative to the Christian anthropology (theorized especially by Augustin, and followed by Thomas Aquinas) which insists on an anthropology as a consequence of sin. The alternative that Scrima counterparts, is that of the Greek tradition, which, he stresses, is mainly theocentric and *theandric*. Scrima's theology enters in dialogues with the work of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, or Gregory Palamas.¹⁰ *The theandric nature of Christ*, as postulated by the Council of Chalcedon, becomes for Scrima an anthropological model. Chalcedonian dogma is thus "the archetype and principle by excellence of any profound encounter between man and divine natures" (p. 91). Departing partially from an anthropology that gravitates around the path to crucifixion, Scrima stresses the *incarnation*, and, through that, the direction towards *deification* (*theosis*). He insists at the same time that "human being meets his Creator, eternally dying in God". The antinomy (or the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as he calls it elsewhere) between humankind and God "accurately represents" a *via crucis* (p. 91). He points thus towards a Christian theology in which the human being is the meeting point between the world and the negation of the world, between what is created and the un-created.

Likeness to the divine principle is what makes us human. We are the only creatures created in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1.26-27), but this *imago Dei* is antinomic and cryptic since nothing can properly bear a resemblance to God. Scrima develops Gregory of Nyssa's idea of *De Hominis Opificio*, of manhood as reflecting godhood: Being an *image of God*, we transcend the world and any understanding of it. One of the consequences is that the classical dualism (soul-body) is transcended by the autonomy of pneumatology. Apophatism becomes thus a "pneumatic realism" (p. 71). Any attempt to clarify by psychological introspection who we are is thus not enough – one needs a mystical introspective experience. Revealing the inner side of the human being, which transcends the conceptual apparatus that was given to us, is possible through a *numinous* experience of a Hesychastic type, which is possible only in virtue of our ontological apo-

⁹ An exegesis of Scrima's relation between his anthropological apophatism and the incarnated *logos* has been undertaken by Cristian Sibişan in *Theanthropologie – Grundzüge der Anthropologie und Christologie André Scrimas* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2017). See also the review by Marian Pătru in the current issue of *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 3 (December 2020): 545-47.

¹⁰ For samples of "apophatic anthropology" and its corollary negative theology ("the one intimately connected with the other") in the western tradition, see: Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

phatic nature.¹¹ This inner apophatism, which reflects God's apophatism, is *the way* of knowing God also, conceivably the only one. God thus should not be searched for externally, but within, in the most profound and inaccessible place. The proposed apophatic anthropology is one "of the depths" (p. 143), in which one can delimitate two distinct regions: one of *homo absconditus* (an apophatic mirror of *Deus absconditus*), and one of *cor absconditum* (since the heart is "the receiver subject of the supernatural presence", p. 143). According to Scrima, apophatic theology does not lead to mystical agnosticism, "it ends in grasping an ontological reality, which is an intellectual experience *sui generis* of divine transcendence, *in finem nostrae cognitionis*" (p. 56).

Any anthropological reduction only to the "description of the exterior levels" (p. 114), as empirical anthropology usually does, is for Scrima insignificant and fatalist. Our identity is not given by our names or any given description.¹² Consequently, if the human being is to have any essential determination, that is of not having the external one. Scrima operates with Kantian concepts, insisting on the "phenomenal" character, i.e. on the externality of the human being, and of his or her "numenal" features, which – regardless of Kant – can be revealed. Christianity is still at the beginning of formulating a systematic anthropology, and Scrima's unfinished study, while it may not be one of the building blocks for such an anthropology, it may well be at least a *prolegomena* to it.

¹¹ For an overview of the relation between apophatic anthropology and Hesychasm, and for an analysis of how Scrima connects apophatism with Hesychasm see Joshua Schooping, "Apophatic Anthropology and Hesychasm: Attending to the Mysterious Depths of Human Being," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 10, no. 4 (2019): 49–85. See also the article by Georgiana Huian in the current *RES* issue, "Einblicke in die apophatische und mystische Bedeutung der theologischen Anthropologie von André Scrima," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 3 (December 2020): 412–38.

¹² According to Charles M. Stang, the pseudonymity of Dionysius the Areopagite is the key to understanding the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. By the negation of his real identity, of what one is at the exterior level, pseudonymity aims to be a mystical enterprise. See: Charles M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially the chapter "No Longer I" *The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite* (153–96).