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Abstract

THE PATRISTIC VISION OF REASON, FAITH AND NATURAL REVELATION. ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN THE CAPADOCIAN SAINTS

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SUMMARY

LIST OF ABREVIATION.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	6
A. Contribution of the present paper. Research methods.....	6
B. Argument for the development of the "arguments for the existence of God". About the contents of this paper.....	8
C. Overview of the course of Orthodox apologetics	15
CHAPTER 1. THE LOGICAL RIGOURS OF THE QUESTION OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD. THE INHERENT LIMITS OF REASON VIEWED IN ITSELF (COMPARATIVE LOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH).....	22
1.1. Questioning the existence of God.....	22
1.2. În drumul spre credință, cât poate rațiunea prin sine însăși?.....	27
1.2.1. On the road to faith, how far can reason by itself?.....	27
1.2.2. Reason and meaning.....	31
1.2.3. Objective truth and pragmatic truth	33
1.2.4. Reason has absolute rigor in the systems it creates, not in relation to reality.....	38
1.2.5. Known truth and recognized good	40
1.2.6. "What do you have that you did not receive?" (<i>1 Co 4:7</i>)	42
1.2.7. Cartesian rationalism is based on faith.....	45
1.2.8. Reason and self-referentiality.....	48
1.2.9. The inherent limitations of knowing by reason alone	54
1.2.10. Right reason, faith and love.....	58
1.2.11. The interest in the fundamental existential question also depends on the instinct of conservation.....	62
1.2.12. The direction of our attitude towards faith does not belong exclusively to reason.....	66
1.2.13. Faith appears where the conditions for its reception are	69
1.2.14. Reason requires faith	70
1.2.15. Reason, constancy, fidelity, faith	73
1.2.16. Logic cannot base itself on itself, but on reality. Logic and faith	76
1.2.17. Premises of faith in materialism.....	81
1.2.18. To attain God only through individual reasoning goes against both divine and human nature	84
1.2.19. The method error of the detractors of arguments for the existence of God. Theistic belief is most consistent with reason and empirical observations	89
1.3. Conclusions	97

CHAPTER 2. REASON AND FAITH AT THE SAINT SAINTS. THE WAY BY WHICH FAITH IS GRASPED BY THE MAN	99
2.1. The way of knowing God. Faith as "view" and distance from scholastic premises.....	99
2.2. The paradox of the tension between individual reason and ecclesial experience.	
Solitary or solidary in the act of joining the faith?	121
2.3. Patristic epistemological premises regarding the act of embracing faith.....	134
2.3.1. Faith is the form of knowledge of God according to His quality of being a person	134
2.3.2. Not reason alone, but natural moral consciousness and the "voūç" are decisive cognitive faculties for embracing faith.....	138
2.4. Knowing and not knowing God in Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory of Nyssa	153
2.5. The unknowability of the divine being in Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. The distinction between knowing "what it is" and "how it is" the divine being	157
2.5.1. Logical Preliminaries: Asking the Question	158
2.5.2. Saint John Chrysostom: <i>On the Incomprehensible Nature of God'</i>	159
2.6. Natural revelation in the teaching of the Holy Fathers.....	176
2.7. Conclusions	183
CHAPTER 3. THE SEEN WORLD IS A GUIDE TO THE UNSEEN.....	186
3.1. Arguments of the Cappadocian Saints against the eternal existence of the world (of the preexistence of matter)	186
3.1.1. Preliminaries. The logical and epistemological problem of matter's eternity.....	186
3.1.2. The distinction between uncreated and created.....	189
3.1.3. A (mathematical!) argument of Saint Basil against Aristotle	192
3.1.4. The argument of the corruption of the whole from reference to the corruption of its parts	198
3.1.5. Arguing against the co-eternity of matter and God.....	202
3.2. The use of nature contemplation at Saint Basil the Great, in <i>Hexaemeron</i>	210
3.3. Conclusion	229
CHAPTER 4. SAINT BASIL THE GREAT'S TREATISE OF THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL. THE FIRST CHRISTIAN THEODICY	233
4.1. Preliminaries. The dilemma of the existence of evil in relation to the existence of God	233
4.2. "Theodicy" of Saint Basil the Great in the <i>9th Homily: That God is not the author of evil</i> ... <td>240</td>	240
4.2.1. The essential ideas of the <i>9th Homily</i>	240
4.2.2. Distinction between physical evil and "evil itself"	247
4.2.3. Individual evil and collective evil. The double therapeutic and pedagogical utility of evil ..	250
4.2.4. Ways in which providence leverages or directs existing evil	255
4.2.5. Appropriate reasons for patience and comfort in suffering. For understanding and overcoming evil.....	260
4.2.5.1. Unwavering trust in divine providence.....	261
4.2.5.2. The hope in the Resurrection and future rewards	261
4.2.5.3. Only moral evil is bad. Evil has no existence of its own.....	263

4.2.5.4. God's plans and economy must be received even when they are hidden from us	268
4.2.5.5. Let us take the example of the long-suffering of Righteous Job and the holy martyrs....	269
4.2.5.6. One possible answer to the question "why doesn't God intervene to prevent or stop incipient evil?"	273
4.3. Conclusions	276
CHAPTER 5: RATIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN THE WRITINGS OF THE CAPPADOCIAN SAINTS.....	279
5.1. Argument of the order of the universe (<i>kosmos</i>).....	279
5.2. Movement and its stability as an argument in favor of creation	291
5.2.1. Brief introduction to the classic First Mover argument as an argument for the existence of God	291
5.2.2. The First Mover's Argument at Saint Basil the Great and at Saint Gregory the Theologian.....	292
5.2.3. The stability of movement as a sign and testimony of the existence of God, in Saint Gregory of Nyssa.....	297
5.2.4. Conclusion.....	300
5.3. The Causality (or First Cause) Argument	300
5.4. The teleological (or finality) argument in the Cappadocian Saints.....	303
5.5. Cosmological argument: the part mirrors the whole	313
5.6. The "Degrees of Perfection" Argument (or Testimony)	318
5.7. The harmony of opposites as an argument in favor of Creation	342
5.7.1. Putting the problem under a logical-philosophical aspect.....	342
5.7.2. The harmony of opposites in the world is a sign of God's existence	343
5.7.3. Conclusion.....	348
5.8. Beauty as testimony to the existence of God	349
5.9. Conclusions	367
CHAPTER 6. THE TESTIMONY OF FACTS PREVAILS OVER INTERPRETATIONS OF REASON. CHRISTIAN FAITH IS BASED ON FACTS	371
6.1. The primacy of facts over speculation in Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Facticity as a Testimony in Favor of the Truth of Revelation.....	371
6.1.1. Preliminaries. "The Testimony of Facts" in Scripture and Science	371
6.1.2. "The Testimony of Deeds" to Saint Gregory of Nyssa. Kinds of wonderful deeds	373
6.2. Testimony of the Cappadocian Saints about the fixity of species (against evolutionism)	385
6.2.1. The real problem: Evolution as a scientific theory is neither proven nor provable ..	385
6.2.2. The Cappadocian Saints contradict the evolution of species	395
6.2.2.1. The long time of Darwinian evolution is foreign to the Cappadocian Saints	396
6.2.2.2. Immutability of species	402
6.2.3. How God created the world from nothing remains a mystery. The Six Days of <i>Genesis</i> are days of wonder.....	414

6.3. Rational argument and at the same time factual testimony: the existence of miracles and holiness as a testimony to awaken and strengthen faith.....	421
6.3.1. Logical-philosophical clarification of the problem	421
6.3.2. Miracles and holiness in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.....	425
6.3.3. The Cappadocian Saints on the potential of miracles and holiness to arouse and strengthen faith	429
6.4. Conclusion.....	446
CONCLUSIONS.....	449
BIBLIOGRAPHY	453
ANNEXES.....	492
Annexe 1: Glossary of (Greek) patristic terms.....	492
Annexe 2: List of foreign or technical (non-Greek) expressions star_border	500
Annexe 3: Index of names.....	503
Annexe 4: Exemplary citations regarding the treated subject.....	506
Annexe 5: Icon of the Cappadocian Saints	512
Annexe 6: Map with reference to the space and time of the Cappadocian Saints.....	513
SUMMARY.....	514

Keywords: *reason, faith, natural Revelation, Cappadocian Saints, science*

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

A. Contribution of this paper. Research methods

The fruit of this work is to reject, on patristic grounds, both exaggerations of the "arguments for the existence of God": strict rationalism (from a mistaken takeover of the scholastic tradition¹), which places exclusive emphasis on autonomous reason, independent of Revelation, and relativism of reason, which results in fideism or agnosticism. We have proved that both extremes are incorrect attitudes, both logically and theologically. For this I was also interested in their premises, either logical or theological (especially anthropological). Orthodoxy is, however, the middle way, the way of balance between extremes, or the "royal way" (according to the patristic formula). And in the Cappadocian Fathers I found formulations that repudiate both extremes.

Sometimes an author's method of reasoning or deduction may be logically correct, but the premises from which he starts may be wrong (which is obviously not the case with the Cappadocian Saints, but is the case with the rationalists or Kant). This is why I emphasize awareness of the premises of the authors I am dealing with.

What is new in this doctoral thesis is the rigorous logical and theological position towards the "arguments for the existence of God", illustrated and confirmed by taking up the ideas of the Cappadocian Saints: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Gregory of Nyssa and his sister, St. Macrina. The present work is intended as material that can realistically inspire and support both the dialogue of theology with philosophy and with science, or rather the dialogue of the Church with people who are either philosophically or scientifically trained, but who have questions and doubts about the "arguments for the existence of God".

As research methods we used the study of the text of the works of the Cappadocian Fathers (in different languages: Romanian, Ancient Greek, English and French), the research of studies of other recent authors on the given topic, logical and semantic analysis of the text in its context, abstraction, synthesis and others.

B. Argument for the development of the "arguments for the existence of God". About the contents of this paper

I have reason to believe that the theme of the present research (of "the arguments for the existence of God") is not without benefit to contemporary readers, especially young people, intellectuals and the dialogue between theology and science. Christians need to have a well - articulated knowledge of the foundations and content of revealed faith and not be content with merely a sentimental, formalistic or superficial embrace of faith.

In the research I reiterated the usual criticism of Orthodox apologetics against medieval scholasticism, which, by exaggerating the role of reason, distorted the relationship between reason and faith, allowing the idea that adherence to faith follows rigorous logical demonstration to emerge. Thus instead of the primary role of reason being that according to its iconic and communitarian-personalist structure, i.e. agreement with the supreme Reason (*Logos*) through the doing of good, i.e. rational acts (befitting the rational nature), reason came to be seen as separate from the mind (νοῦς), morality and divine Reason, remaining an instrument for handling impersonal reasons in creation.

However, in addition to scholastic rationalism, the other extreme of moral and epistemological relativism, which is nowadays rampant under the umbrella of the ubiquitous philosophy called postmodernism, had to be countered. This ideological current considers that both reason and human nature are not objective and unchanging, but relative and subjective. This can lead to a severe limitation of the role of reason in society and the human and social sciences, which is already visible. But reason cannot be downplayed because, together with free will, it defines the mystery of the divine image in man. It is the leading and noblest part of man. Thus, if we do not specify the purpose of the "arguments for the existence of God" by articulating them organically within the framework of patristic premises and thought, we risk oscillating between the two extremes: rationalism and relativism.

And so we are faced with an (apparent?) logical paradox: on the one hand, if God did not leave in His creation the possibility of a rational demonstration of His existence, then it may seem to some like a God Who hid Himself from His own creation behind a blind evolutionary process in which divine intervention seems unnecessary (if Darwinism is proven to be "scientific" and evolution really occurs). And then how can He be called "love" if He leaves no visible traces of His existence, like an unmistakable imprint of Himself in creation (as atheist or agnostic philosophers claim)? How is He still shared love if the traces of His workings or the truth of His knowledge can be detected only through faith? Then how does one explain the clear-cut tone of the Apostle Paul who said that men are responsible for their unbelief (Rom. 1:20: "so that they are without excuse")? And if there is no "exact" reasoning to support the grounds of faith, does this mean that believing in the Christian God is a subjective act, a blind leap outside reason?

There is often talk in academic circles and in prestigious publications about the need for dialogue between science and theology or "science and religion". But a dialogue is only possible if there is a common denominator, a basis, i.e. common knowledge, and common interests between the interlocutors. But a common ground with science, which is based on the method of analytical reason, can only be the correct use of reason. (Does reason need to be accompanied by a "user's manual"?) And I show in Chapter 1 that the great advantage of reason is that it can rationally determine its limits. Both in science and in theology. Without first drawing the logical and rational framework of these limits, any dialogue of theology with science remains poetry. Beautiful, but ineffective. And what I show in chapter 1 is both the demythologizing of an exacerbation of the potential of reason, which cannot know everything, but it is also a reflection that gives confidence in the exercise of right reason, within its just limits. Therefore, the "rational character" of the arguments for the existence of God cannot be understood as arguments of the type of formal logic, as constraining as the theorems of mathematics. This is because the self-referentiality of reason is not only a theological error, but also a logical one¹.

But Christians should not always show reserve towards the use of reason, since our God himself is called Logos, which means Reason. And the Eastern Fathers (like St. Anthony the Great or St. John Cassian) emphasize that the chief virtue of the Christian is "right reason" (a phrase translated as "right reckoning"). So we must also investigate where scholasticism went wrong, what the good parts of its arguments are and what is the right patristic view of the relationship between reason and faith, hence the orthodox reference to the arguments of the existence of God. For this it is useful to identify the premises of scholastic argumentation

¹ This truth is argued at length in Chapter 1 of this paper. The problem itself is not that scientists have given as axioms, starting with Descartes, mechanicalism or naturalism, but the fact that those uninitiated in the faith have the impression that this materialism is proven or at least provable in the future. But it is only a reductionist philosophical axiom.

and that specific feature of Orthodox theology which distinguishes it from the scholastic view, which is the subject of the investigation in chapter 2. If in the first chapter I outline the logical framework, in the second I specify the framework of the theological and anthropological premises of the possibility of the knowledge of God, i.e. I answer the questions: what are the ways and means by which God is revealed to a consciousness, how faith is awakened in man, and which human faculties are essentially involved in the birth of faith. And at the end of chapter 2 it is pointed out why natural revelation is an objective given and why this idea is more emphasized in the patristic writings than the strictly rational view of the arguments for God's existence.

Chapter 3 opens with patristic and St. Basil's arguments against the eternal existence of matter, a common belief in antiquity. These considerations against the eternity of matter stand as a necessary foundation for Natural Revelation or God's existence arguments. For if matter were from eternity, then the universe is attributed to exclusively material causes, and God is no longer all-powerful and does not create from nothing, and thus the inspiration given in man by Natural Revelation is hindered and blurred. It is clear that the arguments against the pre-eternity of matter logically prepare the possibility of the argument of the First Cause and the First Mover, and of the other rational arguments for the existence of God. For these are based on the premise that the universe has a beginning, or are more manifest if they have this premise.

And in the second part of chapter 3, we follow the benefit of contemplating nature in St. Basil in the *Hexaemeron*, where we find a vast wealth of details on the intelligence planted or imprinted in the universe at all levels of its existence. And this is a serious and palpable stimulus to natural revelation or strengthening in faith. And to stimulate the believer's heart to give glory to his Creator.

Chapter 4 details St. Basil the Great's argument that "God is not the author of evils", a homily recently called "the first Christian theodicy". Here it is shown that although today the most persuasive atheist argument is the presence of evil in the world, the argument is in fact based on faulty premises. And it was debunked by St. Basil as early as the 4th century, using logical arguments and biblical testimony! From this chapter it is clear that there is no contradiction between the existence of evil in the world and the existence of God. Moreover, only the Christian can find the resources to change the meaning of suffering in the world and to turn evil into good. But not alone. Just as not alone can one come to the knowledge of God. He can only through Christ Himself.

Chapter 5 can be considered, together with chapter 6, the core of this PhD thesis, since these chapters develop in detail the arguments for the existence of God announced in the title of the thesis. Chapter 5 gives the rational arguments for the existence of God, found or reconstructed from the writings of the Cappadocian Saints. They show how much these saints valued the right exercise of reason, even though they affirmed that spiritual wisdom and faith are above reason. The conclusion of this chapter is that all levels of existence of the universe are shown to be consistent (or in harmony) with each other, with reason and with faith. They are ultimately a good opportunity to purify from ideological error and make room in the soul for Natural Revelation. They are suitable for debunking the bias that reason and faith are in contradiction or dispute². This I think is a merit of the whole thesis.

But most of all, facts can strengthen faith in biblical revelation. This is why chapter 6 deals with the "testimony of facts" as a support of faith in the writings of the Cappadocian

² Therefore the limits of reason had to be rationally determined, for, as St. Basil the Great says, the power of judgment was given to man as "a privilege" to know God, "and that is how far he should go with knowledge as far as he was permitted" (St. Basil the Great, "Epsitola 233", in *Writings. Part III*, PSB 12, translation, introduction and notes by Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Cornilescu and Pr. Prof. Dr. Teodor Bodogae, EIB, 1988, p. 482).

Saints. The most concise summary of this chapter might be the saying: "Contra factum non est argumentum." Therefore I show that not only in Scripture and in positive science is the testimony of facts decisive for the embrace of a creed, but the Cappadocian Saints also put facts first as testimony and witness in favor of the Christian faith. Moreover, fulfilled prophecies, resurrections from the dead, miracles or healings through prayer are facts, not theoretical speculations. So our faith is based on facts.

It was appropriate, in a chapter (6.2.), to also detail the premises on which Darwinism was built, which was taken as a scientific guarantor by materialism, racism, colonialism, communism and Nazism. Darwinism is important because it has been present in many sciences and academic fields. There are also theologians who, without knowing the unproven premises of Darwinism, give it full credit and, taking as scientific truth a working hypothesis, attempt a reconciliation between "scientific" truth and revealed truth. It is unfortunate that there are theologians, usually without scientific training, who try to produce evidence that the Cappadocian Saints believed in the theory of evolution. There are pages of these holy authors which show unequivocally that they were in favour of the fixity of species and that they denied Darwinist theories. I also had to add a short introductory study on the unproveness of Darwinism based on unproven premises³.

Although these "arguments" are not exact demonstrations in an absolute or scientific sense, we need to explain why their type is not sufficient to engender belief alone. The fact, also made obvious by science, that it is more likely that there is a Creator than that there is not, is not sufficient to engender the certainty of faith. But even these rational arguments, though unnecessary to some, may be the cure for some doubters, for to each one there is a different medicine, according to the disease that gnaws at him⁴. There are cases in which, understood in their imperfect sense, these "arguments" have meant a step forward in opening the mind to the real possibility of what is professed by faith. Especially to those who are devoted to the exercise of reason it is easier to believe when they learn that, although reason alone is not enough, faith is more probable and more consistent with reason than unbelief. So too the arguments of reason can clear some of the stumbling blocks on the road to faith.

One such stone, a rather large and hard one, is the position, circulating in some intellectual and media circles, that what is held in Holy Scripture and the Church's Holy Tradition are myths or legends concocted, as explanatory models of the world, by ignorant scientists. Or that people have turned to theistic faith because they lacked knowledge of many rational (scientific) explanations of the world. In fact, it is precisely the rationality of the universe, mentioned apologetically by St. Paul the Apostle (*Rom. 1:18-20*) and the Holy Fathers, but increasingly emphasised by modern science, argues most strongly for the existence of a transcendent divine Reason. And the miracles in the Church and in creation are not legends, but facts.

Ultimately, for some, the arguments of reason are a support of faith without giving rise to it themselves, and for others, an exhortation either to take the idea of divine revelation seriously or at least to find reasons to doubt the preconceptions of a deeply secularized culture. (And to take the exhortation to further research into the sources of faith). These arguments can also strengthen and help believers by broadening the horizon of our knowledge of God's relationship with the world, but also because many prejudices of secularized man persist tenaciously in our subconscious.

³ I have also included the concise overview of Darwinism in my thesis because I had written the book *Does Evolutionism Have Scientific Proof?* and the book *Science and Faith* a few years ago. *Testimonies of scientists*.

⁴ Everyone needs to know their treatment according to the disease they have. As St. Gregory of Nyssa pointed out, there is also "the disease of ignorance" ("On infants who died prematurely, to Hierios", in *Writings. Part Two*, PSB 30, 1998, p. 419).

I believe that this work is a good exercise in exploiting the heritage of patristic thought in the context of contemporary debates on the relationship between reason and faith, or science and theology. It is a lesson to see how the Holy Fathers used reason justly without being rationalists. And their discourse is, theologically speaking, like a preparation for the vast and far-reaching synthesis of St Maximus in which all aspects of creation and all the faculties of human nature are valued for the spiritual ascent towards union with the Almighty *Logos* and the "cosmic liturgy"⁵.

CHAPTER 1. THE LOGICAL RIGOURS OF THE QUESTION OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD. THE INHERENT LIMITS OF REASON VIEWED IN ITSELF (COMPARATIVE LOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH)

The inability of reason (in the strict sense) to prove/demonstrate (in the strict scientific sense) with self-sufficiency is due neither to the non-existence, nor to the "silence", nor to the "hiding" of God. If reason could prove (mathematically, analytically and logically) only by its own resources the existence of God and without taking into account the Divine Revelation, then the consequences would be extremely serious (if not impossible) for man, for the universe and for the knowledge of God's existence. In fact, it would not have been possible, since it would have been an entirely different God, a different man and a different universe (if it could exist at all), existences greatly narrowed in their being and twisted in their defining characteristics, reduced to unfree mechanisms or puppets, devalued or depersonalized, impoverished of their meaning and essence. Thus, to raise the claim that absolute and personal truth is revealed to you with absolute (perfect) certainty by your imperfect and relative reason alone is to claim that there is a God other than the One who is, one who exists according to laws other than the real ones! It means claiming to be an impersonal God, i.e. lacking the freedom to reveal or not reveal Himself to the creature. It means claiming to be a God who does not call to His love and dialogue through love and respecting the freedom of the rational creature (created in His image with the possibility of the Incarnation), but through the constraining and ineluctable evidence of the logical-scientific type which excludes the probability of knowledge and the freedom of the creature to believe. But a God who does not respect the freedom of the creature is not the God of love, is not "the One who is", but a God who is only in man's imagination! For a God who does not respect with discretion and love the freedom of His children is an unjust God, that is, a God who does not exist in reality! How to arrive at the humility that recognizes its insufficiency... through the self-sufficiency of the calculation of autonomous reason? How to arrive at the mode of God's being, which is love, by a method that excludes love? How to arrive at perfect communion by a method that excludes communion from the start? It is also a logical contradiction the relativist or rationalist claim, not only theologically deviant.

In this first chapter I have shown the inherent limitations of reason and reasoning in finding answers to the great existential questions, and primarily to the question of God's existence. However, although self-referentiality is a logical fallacy, reason can rationally set itself certain limits, namely how far it can go with its logic or deduction, without entering a terrain where it cannot produce certainty by itself alone.

I have mentioned that science cannot be based exclusively on reasoning or logic, but also needs experience (observations, experiments). All the more so, a correct knowledge of what is beyond reason and the world, i.e. of what is of God, cannot be found with certainty only on the path of individual logic, separated from the experience of the divine. Moreover, the act of embracing faith involves not only the rational side, but also human freedom. If we

⁵ It is obviously a phrase taken from the title of Hans Urs von Balthasar's book dedicated to the work of St Maximus Confessor.

were to come to faith exclusively through scientific reasoning, as constraining as the Pythagorean theorem, then where is man's freedom to believe and how does he receive reward for his faith? Moreover, individual reasoning, autonomous, independent of the experience of the community of saints, is more akin to individualism, and then how can the God of love be discovered, as a rule, on the individualistic path, when the goal of faith is (full) communion with God?

Reason has also shown its inherent limitations in specifying the basic axioms of science, so those who invalidate rational arguments for the existence of God solely on the basis of the rigor of formal logic commit the mistake of holding religion to a higher standard of earthly logic than the axioms of science can. Reason, however, being the gift of God and the highest nobility of man, showing itself in the image of God, has also the possibility that, being well acquainted with the rationality of the universe and the wonderful facts of salvation history and the life of the Church, it may conclude that, in the end, faith is the best explanation suited to reason and empirical observations (or facts). And this definition is also a good approximation to science. Which also shows the edifying role of reason.

But to overestimate the cognitive power of autonomous reason is also a non-rational intrusion by which *sapientia mundi* is intended to prevail over *sapientia Dei*. Since God is love, it follows naturally that approach to Him must be made first by *sensing His love*, this being the first response to His love, and not first by rational calculation. So the first step towards God and towards knowing Him is to recognize that you are not alone and that you cannot do it alone.

CHAPTER 2. REASON AND FAITH AT THE SAINT FATHERS. THE WAY BY WHICH FAITH IS GRASPED BY THE MAN

If exclusivist and supposedly infallible rationalism is the well-known error of Catholic scholasticism, this does not mean that we should allow ourselves to fall into the other extreme, that of the absolute subjectivity of the act of faith, a conception that is widespread in modernism and leads to relativism, atheism or agnosticism. It is true that reason is not infallible, but neither should it be excluded in the birth of faith. Faith comes from "hearing", it is established by grace, but in the hearers of the preaching of the word about the Word or *Logos* incarnate. (And "logos" also means reason, not just word.)

The "testimonies" of natural and supernatural revelation are also, in the final analysis, reasons and arguments that make it easier to open the listener to the breath of faith. These testimonies are not such as to constrain man's freedom to believe, for he who does not want to believe at all will listen neither to the voice of reason nor to the testimony of the saints, and will always find alternative questions for every "testimony" of faith. But these "testimonies", from nature, from Scripture and from the life of the Church, confirm and deepen the understanding of faith, and above all its truthfulness. And hope, or strengthened faith, comes through prayer.

Therefore, reason is neither to be idolized nor to be rejected. Neither alone nor excluded. This apologetic inclusion and valorization of the clarity of reason in theological discourse is often found not only at Fathers such as St Maxim Confessor or St. John Damascene but also at the Cappadocian Saints, at whom philosophical erudition goes hand in hand with the theological clarity of the right faith.

After outlining in the first chapter the logical framework of the limits of reason with regard to the knowledge of God, in the second chapter I outlined the theological and anthropological premises for the knowledge of God. Two essential questions arise here: (i) how far can man go in knowing God and (ii) what is the human faculty to which the knowledge and existence of God is revealed?

To the first question the Saint Fathers (including the Cappadocian Saints) answered that God can never be known in His being, but can be known by His uncreated activities or energies. In other words, God is transcendent by being and immanent by activities. We know from the divine activities present in the world that God exists, but not how He exists. For this "how" something more would be needed: God's self-disclosure or supernatural revelation. God is not only transcendent but also a free Person, and to be known He must first disclosure Himself. And He did this at the right time.

Since faith grounds not a social contract or a scientific method operating with objects, but an interpersonal relationship, it follows that individual reasoning alone is not sufficient to ground it. At the basis of the interpersonal relationship lies trust, respect and love, in a word, fidelity, more than any calculation or reasoning. We trust in the word of God, in the word of the Holy Apostles and of the holy martyrs, and that is why we believe in Christ. Thus, it is not constraining reasoning but faith that is the kind of knowledge proper to the quality of God and of man as persons. The method of scientific logic is to conquer objects, not persons.

Moreover, the patristic teaching on reason does not, like modernity, place the analytical and logical faculty of reason or the methodical dexterity of storing and handling information at the centre, but gives primacy to the good connected with the use of reason, so that the rational is not the one who knows a lot or has formed logical and intellectual skills, although this is a good thing, but the one who performs rational deeds, that is, according to reason and to the requirements of human nature towards its (spiritual) health, as God intended. Thus, in the patristic conception, a man with great intellectual capacity, but who lives in sin with the body, is not rational. Rational is he who submits his bodily passions to reason, and not he who is merely educated. Rational is he who keeps the reason (words and rules) given to us by the divine Reason (or *Logos*).

More than logic or analytical reason, natural moral conscience and mind (*voūs*) are the faculties of the rational part of man that inspire and lead him to (re)know the existence of God. The mind (*voūs*) is endowed with a 'noetic sense' (mental or spiritual) through which it can receive the experience of divine grace or uncreated energies. Thus, having the possibility of experiencing uncreated energies, Orthodox consciousness can escape the agnostic conclusion (which denies the possibility of knowing God). Of course, faith in God or knowledge of God is not the exclusive fruit of man, but the gift of God, which is love. Therefore, in the East, unlike in the West, the emphasis is less on the rational arguments for the existence of God, in which the powers of man take precedence, and more on natural revelation, insisting on its character as God's gift to man. But both reason and nature are gifts of God to man and, as such, there can be no real contradiction between them. And if there are men who do not receive objective natural Revelation, this is primarily due to their subjectivity produced by selfish passions and undone by the desire to detach themselves from them.

CHAPTER 3. THE SEEN WORLD IS A GUIDE TO THE UNSEEN

In this chapter we have investigated the significance and contribution to the argument for the existence of God of the logical and patristic arguments against the eternal existence of matter. The Holy Fathers, although they borrowed many good ideas from Hellenism, opposed the conception of the eternity of matter, present in Hellenistic philosophy and pagan mythology, a conception professed also by the most illustrious philosophers of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle.

From a strictly logical point of view, the question can be asked: was there ever a time when there was nothing, absolutely nothing (i.e. neither matter nor God)? The obvious answer is that if there had been nothing, that nothingness or absolute nothingness would still

have produced nothingness. Mathematically, no matter how much we add zero to zero, zero still results. Therefore, since there is something, it means that it is not possible that there was once a time when there was nothing. And then it means that there has always been something, or that existence has always existed. And this is a logical conclusion, not a theological one. The obvious question, then, is: what kind of nature is that "something" that has existed from eternity? Is it something in continuity of substance with the universe (so matter would be eternal), or an eternal cause of the universe, not situated on its plane of existence (so transcendent)?

In fact, since it is a consequence of logical thinking that something must have always existed (from eternity), without specifying yet *what* or *who* that *something* is, it means that theism-atheism antinomy is reduced to the antinomy between belief in God and belief in matter. Therefore, since something exists from eternity anyway (this being a logical conclusion), whoever refuses to believe that this preeternal existence is transcendent, does nothing but affirm the eternal existence of matter or of the material universe. So atheism is necessarily materialism (or naturalism). And the whole debate between faith and atheism boils down to the debate about what is that *something* (or Someone) that necessarily existed from eternity: God or matter?

On the other hand, the eternal pre-existence of matter is not a conception consistent with the rapidly perishing nature of what is seen. Those who affirm the eternal pre-existence of matter propose a cosmological dualism that falls into polytheism, since they introduce more than a center of divine existence, contradicting the absolute uniqueness of God, affirming a matter "that was something other than God, something that shares the notion of eternity with that which is without beginning, as if we were suddenly putting together in the same notion two beings without beginning and without birth [duo anarcha kai agennēta]"⁶. Those who thought that "this seen world is coeternal with God, the Creator of the universe"⁷ not only bring a detraction to the divine perfection, but "raise the material and bounded world to the same glory as the ungrasped and unseen being of the godhead"⁸.

God did not need an amorphous external matter to which to impart the form of rationality contained in the divine wisdom because any material nature as soon as it exists, exists in a certain concrete form, any matter can only exist in a form shaped according to the laws of the universe. This foreshadows contemporary scientific conceptions which assert that no matter can exist without intrinsic rationality or "structural information". St. Basil, interpreting the words of Genesis I,1 ("God made the heavens and the earth"), shows that He did not simply imprint their form from pre-existing matter, as if He had only "half-made" them, for God is truly Creator only if He created *ex nihilo*, otherwise He would only be an Artisan *external* to matter, and nature would not be the concretization of His thoughts.

The strong tone in favour of the *objective character* of natural revelation, present in Holy Scripture, was also adopted by the Cappadocian Saints when they spoke of cosmic order or harmony as a *witness to* the existence of God and His features. However, before dealing with the fruits of contemplating nature in St. Basil the Great, it was necessary to detail his arguments against the eternal existence of matter. Which is a necessary basis for Natural Revelation or for arguments for the existence of God on the basis of the cosmic order. For if matter is from everlasting, then one can easily believe about the creation of the universe that it was caused exclusively by material elements, and that God is not an All-Mighty Creator, and thus obstructs the channels through which Natural Revelation is inspired in man. It is easy to understand that the arguments against the pre-eternity of matter logically

⁶ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man", Chapter XXIII, in *Writings, Part II*, PSB 30, EIB, Bucharest, 1998, p. 65.

⁷ *Hexaemeron*, I, 3, *op.cit.*, p. 74.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

prepare the possibility of the argument of the First Cause and the First Mover, as well as the other rational arguments for the existence of God. For these are based on the premise that the universe has a beginning, or are more manifest if they have this premise.

Criticizing those who remain idolaters or believe in the eternity of matter, even though they are intensely engaged in the sciences, St. Basil pronounces a conclusion akin to the Pauline sentence of Rom. 1:21-22 ("they have erred in their thoughts and their unwise heart is darkened, and saying that they are wise, they have become fools")⁹.

A kind of "doom" (κατάκρισις¹⁰) was also alluded to by the Apostle Paul pointing out the irreducible responsibility of men in the face of the objective character of natural revelation: "For what can be known about God, God has shown to them, so that they may be without excuse" (Rom. 1:18). Very interesting that, in fact, "περιουσία" means, more precisely, "surplus, superabundance". Perhaps this is the key word of St. Basil's *Hexaemeron*. For there he brings a superabundance of testimonies of all the elements and "wonders" of creation, all pointing to the Creator.

CHAPTER 4. SAINT BASIL THE GREAT'S TREATISE OF THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL. THE FIRST CHRISTIAN THEODICY

The teaching about the existence of evil is not explicitly among the arguments for the existence of God, but it is worthy of attention since the existence of evil is the most important rhetorical weapon against faith for the propagators of atheism or agnosticism¹¹. They misrepresent evil and suffering in the world as testimony against the existence of God, wanting to create the impression that this denial of God's existence on the basis of the existence of evil (moral or physical) is a logical conclusion. In reality, the affirmation of the non-existence of God, or of His pronia or revelation to the world (in the case of agnostics), is not a logical assertion, but a philosophical one and a wrong theological position built on false premises.

St. Basil uses some basic principles for his plea that "God is not the author of evil". First that "from the good comes no evil". God cannot be the author of evil nor responsible for the existence of evil since He is perfection itself, and therefore He is also goodness, absolute love. Since good means being united by will with the supreme Good, evil is the separation from good, so evil is defined as "alienation from God". Substances are created by God, but He being Good, could not create an evil substance, so evil has no substance, it is a disease of the will entered into the existence due to the wrong use of the free will of the rational beings (fallen angel and man). Evil is the absence of good, it has no hypostasis of its own. So evil is neither uncreated nor created. If it were uncreated, then it would be coeternal with God, which would make an imperfect, hence non-existent God. If evil were created, God being the only one who creates out of nothing, it would mean that He is responsible for evil. But evil is not substance or hypostasis (ύπόστασις), so it has no subsistence of its own, being a wrong

⁹ "Surely (ἵπου), to them (αὐτοῖς), the riches (ή περιουσία) of the wisdom of the world (τῆς τοῦ κόσμου σοφίας) the adage bears them sometime (προσθήκην οἴσει ποτὲ) their terrible doom (τῆς χαλεπῆς κατακρίσεως), that so penetratingly examining the vain (ὅτι οὕτως ὄξν περὶ τὰ μάταια βλέποντες), of their own free will (έκοντες) have made themselves blind (ἀπετυφλώθησαν) to the understanding of the truth (πρὸς τὴν σύνεσιν τῆς ἀληθείας). [...] but one knowledge (μίαν μηχανήν) of all (τῶν πασῶν) they have not discovered (οὐκ ἔξεδρον), the knowledge of understanding that God (πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν ἐννοήσαι) is the Creator of the universe (Ποιητὴν τοῦ παντὸς) and the Right Judge (καὶ κριτὴν δίκαιον)." (P.G. 29, col. 12 A, B.) I have translated somewhat differently from the Romanian translation of St. Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron*, I: IV, PSB 17, 1986, with translation, introduction and notes by Pr. D. Fecioru, p. 75.

¹⁰ It means "the action of condemning, damning, condemnation, damnation".

¹¹ "The problem of evil is generally regarded as the strongest objection to theism." (*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, "general editor": Robert Audi, second edition, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 699).

way of actualizing the powers of the creature by its free will. Therefore it cannot be created by God.

Evil can also be divided into two logical-philosophical categories: real evil and apparent evil. The criterion of differentiation between the two categories is the moral one, but from the perspective of the soteriological couple sin/salvation. Real evil is moral evil, sin, which means separation from God, leading to eternal damnation, and apparent evil is physical evil: pain and sorrow. Evil can be individual or collective, but God can allow or even bring about apparent or physical evil, even large-scale devastation (as in Sodom and Gomorrah), when real (moral) evil has reached an overwhelming extent. So, thinking from the perspective of the ultimate purpose of human life, which is salvation, God also derives some utility from the existence of evil, turning evil into good in the long run. Thus, from the perspective of the justice/righteousness couple, God extracts from evil therapeutic and pedagogical utility for humans. As Creator and Saviour, God is at the same time Teacher, Doctor and Judge who restores out of love the justice of creation, making right where it has chosen evil. Thus, in God's economy towards the creature, justice and divine love are inseparable, so the atheistic argument that God cannot be loving because he allows evil and pain. If God does not allow the possibility of evil, it means that he does not allow the possibility of free will in rational beings, and then they could not perform acts of any moral value or spiritual reward.

Thus, St. Basil in his theodicy, in addition to the theological (biblical) and logical - philosophical explanations of the existence of evil, adds the personal-existential solution to the problem of evil. This concerns two kinds of action in the face of evil: the action of God and the action recommended to man. We have seen the former above, when we mentioned the divine economy (*oikoumēnia*), which is often hidden in the afflictions, so that the one afflicted by evil is forced to accept it without (fully) understanding the reasons or purposes of what happens to him. And the man afflicted by evil must adapt his action to the divine action, serving the same purpose: man's salvation, eternal happiness in communion with God.

It is worth noting in St. Basil's theodicy a "totalizing dialectic"¹², an integrating vision that does not obey the fragment, but looks at the whole of human existence, starting from the root of evil and culminating in the goal of creation, i.e. salvation, uniting philosophical logic and biblical study with the soteriological and eschatological vision. St. Basil the Great's solutions to the problem of the existence of evil are still valid today, even from a philosophical and logical point of view. Logically speaking, no one has ever put forward a (remotely) satisfactory counter-argument to the argument that evil is due to the free will of rational beings. Which is the keystone of St. Basil's theodicy.

Finally, since God often turns evil into good, according to the Cappadocian Saints, it follows, by the *reductio ad absurdum* method, that if there had been no Creator and the world were the product of blind chance and rationality, then evil would have been far greater. If all living things were the product of the struggle for survival and adaptation of the fittest, then selfishness would be ubiquitous and all-powerful as the creative principle of life. The very superabundance of goodness, love and beauty (or "the richness of the wisdom of this world," according to St. Basil) is a plea that the world is not the product of chance, but of a Creator who cares for it.

Not only did St. Basil show that there is no contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil in the world, but evil itself sometimes becomes a witness to the existence of God when it is turned for good by divine intervention. And the most wonderful example of this is not only found in Job but in the Saviour himself Christ, who changed the

^{16 12} Charbel Maalouf, *op. cit.* p. 73.

evil done by those who crucified him into the beginning of salvation for all who believe in him.

CHAPTER 5: RATIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN THE WRITINGS OF THE CAPPADOCIAN SAINTS

In this chapter we have shown in detail that the Cappadocian Saints contain ideas, formulations and developments which, used as building blocks, can reconstruct rational arguments in favour of the existence of God and divine pronia. Even if the saints did not call them so, thematically, the names being the contribution of scholasticism or modern philosophy, the ideas are also found in them, and still consistently, as Jaroslav Pelikan pointed out¹³.

These arguments have certain features in common. For example, they are not a simple exercise in logic, dematerialised and devoid of the object of investigation, they are not speculation within a system of abstract propositions, but are based on something *external to* the knowing consciousness, and finally, on facts, on external reality.

For the order of the universe (the basis for the argument from order or design), the ordering instincts and intelligent ingenuity present in beings without intelligence (in the teleological argument), the law of causality and the impossibility of an infinite series of material causes (the basis for the argument from First Cause or First Mover), the harmony of opposites or the impossibility for a lower order of existence to pass from itself to a radically higher one, and the superabundance of beauty in the world are either realities or observations on reality. So these arguments are not theories suspended in an abstract space, but anchored in reality.

On the other hand, they do not have the compelling force of formal logic and modern scientific method arguments. That is why the term "rational" in conjunction with these "arguments" is not to be understood in the sense of the rigour of the logic of science. I have analysed (in the first chapter) that this is due to the inherent limitations of human nature and reason, and to the complexity of the subject matter. (After all, it is about the whole of the universe and what is above it!) Therefore these "rational" arguments are not as rationally compelling as a mathematical theorem or a law of physics. Their conclusion is not reached by inference in the strict sense (as in syllogisms), but by an overall intuition about reality, but this intuition is *in conformity to the reason*, reinforced by reason and confirmed by it. It is thus obvious, on rational grounds, that monotheism is in accordance with reason, and therefore rational, and its opposite, atheism, is not in accordance with reason. Moreover, in recent modern science, philosophers of science show that science too can redefine scientific truth as the verification of a proposed model, as the best explanation suited to reason and experiment (or observation, facts). And by this definition, the arguments for the existence of God acquire a rationality closer to science, they are the best rational explanation consistent with reason and facts, regarding origins.

But there are (at least) two points that make God's existence unprovable by the methods of science. First, as St Maximus states Confessor, in order to prove something, a principle or beginning (*arhe*) must be found prior to that something to be proved, and in the case of God there can be nothing prior to Him or which is His cause¹⁴. Secondly, as pointed out in chapter 3, creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) is a unique act, occurring only at the origin of the universe, and therefore unrepeatable. And science, by its very definition, can only study observable, repeatable and testable phenomena. For secular science, *creatio ex*

¹³ Jaroslav Pelikan *Christianity and classical culture: the metamorphosis of natural theology in the Christian encounter with Hellenism*, Yale University, 1993.

¹⁴ Saint Maxim Confessor, *Second Philokalia*, "The Two Hundred Theological and Gnostic Heads", 1st cent. 9.

nihilo is an impossible phrase, being the first huge miracle performed by God and the beginning of everything, but impossible to identify and prove by scientific means based on empirical observation or the study of vestiges. Creation out of nothing is God's alone, unrepeatable and incapable of leaving 'archaeological traces'. The Hellenistic philosophers, such as the great Aristotle, did not even know about *creatio ex nihilo*, and that is why they came to wrong conclusions, such as the preeternity of matter.

A commonplace of the writings of the Cappadocian Saints is the admiration for the "superabundance of the wisdom of the world" (St. Basil) often indicated by the term "miracles" of creation. This term is not merely a rhetorical gloss intended to stir the hearer to the praise of the Creator, nor is it the effect of a lack of scientific knowledge, quite precarious at the time, but has a rational basis in the very reality of the astonishingly complex rationality of the universe at all levels of its existence.

But of all creatures, by far the greatest miracle is man, "the kingly creature" (St. Gregory of Nyssa). Through his mind and reason, he is most reminiscent of the wonderful likeness of the Creator of all. This is why St. Macrina speaking against those who do not believe in God or in the immortality of the soul, profoundly pronounces a sentence that is still logically valid today: "For if everything that cannot be known by the senses is to be excluded from the universe... then how can even the human mind not be denied the moment that it is denied every material possession?"¹⁵

And the fact that for the multiple facets and levels of existence rational statements are found pointing to the Creator shows that all are consistent with each other, as well as with reason and faith. The conclusion is that the observable universe, rather than Darwinian disunity, is more suited to features such as *harmony*, *wonder (miracle)* and *communion*: "For behold the harmony of the universe, the heavenly and earthly *miracles* (thaumata), and the fact that the elements, though opposed to each other in their nature, yet all interweave in a communion for the same end, each helping in its own part, by its power, to the continuance of the whole."¹⁶

CHAPTER 6. THE TESTIMONY OF FACTS PREVAILS OVER INTERPRETATIONS OF REASON. CHRISTIAN FAITH IS BASED ON FACTS

There are clear and unequivocal testimonies of the Cappadocian Saints that refute the modern doctrine of Darwinism. As a result, recent "theologians" who claim to have detected allusions to evolutionism in these holy Church writers are merely inserting their own opinions into the text of the saints, attributing to them intentions which they have clearly contradicted. It has been seen that both the very long (almost mythical!) time required for Darwinism and the biological transformationism of species or the existence of a common ancestor for all living things are conceptions foreign to the Cappadocian Saints. On the contrary, they state loudly and often their belief in creation *ex nihilo* and in the fixity of species. From the quotations so far it is again clear that the Cappadocian Saints had a conception totally foreign to what in Darwinism is called the existence of "intermediate species" or "transitional forms", which should, according to the theory, exist for all the billions of known species (but are nowhere to be found).

We also find in the Cappadocian Saints' interpretation of the *Genesis* the precious idea that the period of the Six Days of the primordial creation was guided by God according to laws other than those observable today, being days of *miracles*. The very elements of nature held other properties and laws, being sustained by God in existence, not

¹⁵ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, "Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection" in *Writings, Part II*, PSB 30, EIB, Bucharest, 1998, p. 359.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 353.

mechanistically by mutual interactions, but by His creative word through which the physical laws known today were given.

From this we logically conclude that no one, not even science, can claim certainty about *how* God created each element of nature. The manner of God's creation remains a mystery, just as the creation of matter out of nothing (of which St Gregory of Nyssa speaks) is an unfathomable mystery.

We can use the above conclusions apologetically for the present: if modern science does not exclude from possible premises and does not exclude *ab initio* the possibility of the existence of a transcendent Creator, then the Darwinian conclusion is only a forced interpretation, but not with logical certainty, of poor and equivocal observations. (Leading evolutionary scientists argue that the fossil record can also be interpreted in a creationist sense, and is not only open to evolutionary interpretation. In fact, the catastrophist interpretation is more plausible than the uniformitarian interpretation even in geology and paleontology).

Why can't Darwinist conclusions be logically valid? Because relying on principles contradicted by reality (such as "the present is the key to the past" or "morphological similarity is evidence of evolutionary relatedness") leads to conclusions that are broken by reality. If the premises are wrong, then the conclusions are wrong. And if science bases its correct theories on observations, then what St. Gregory of Nyssa said in the 4th century is far more probable than evolutionism and has remained true to this day: "It is seen that everywhere in the world it is ordained that the life of nature should be preserved in its measure and harmony, as the Creator has left it from the beginning of wisdom for the beauty of the whole world."¹⁷

If materialism were true, i.e. if *everything* is matter, then there can be nothing that cannot be explained solely by the laws of matter. Then, as a logical consequence, if a single miracle were to occur, it follows that materialism is false (since *everything* is no longer matter). Achilles' heel of the materialist conception is precisely its totalizing character.

From the famous writings of the Cappadocian Saints, one can extract teachings and testimonies about miracles and holiness which, put together, give a reconstruction of the patristic conception of the existence of holiness and miracles as a witness to the awakening and strengthening of faith. The saints were men like ourselves, with frail flesh, but yet by the power of faith their will was strengthened, so that their endurance in torment and affliction seemed beyond the limits of human nature. Both their deeds of heroism and total dedication, their moral purity, and the miracles performed through them had, and still have, the gift of pointing to a superhuman source, confirming by deed faith in God. It is not philosophical speculation that takes precedence, but "the testimony of facts". Also, the faith and life of the saints are in unison with their word, thus making it worthy of belief. When the Christian faith shapes such people and produces such signs and powers, their contemporaries and future generations are strengthened in the truth and their faith is strengthened or/and gains new powers.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present paper has been to show, with testimonies from the Cappadocian Saints (and from other Holy Fathers in the first two chapters), that both extremes, i.e. rationalism and fideism, being exclusivist, are wrong with regard to the arguments for the existence of God. Neither the exacerbation of reason nor its evacuation from the vision of faith is right. In other words, reason can also be involved in the act of

¹⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologetic Address to Hexaemeron, to his brother Peter*, in *Writings. Part Two*, PSB 30, p. 112.

embracing faith, but without being sufficient. As I showed in the first chapter, it can be logically proved that the self-sufficiency and self-referentiality of reason are a mistake of method and logic of the exercise of reason.

However, one can build a common denominator or bridge to the rational way of thinking or the scientific method by noting that just as the fundamental axioms of science cannot be proved exclusively by the rigour of formal logic, but are the best explanation (of reality) that is consistent with reason and facts (empirical observations), so too, by resorting to reason, (mono)theism or Christian faith can be said to be the best explanation consistent with reason and facts.

These conclusions were logically proved in Chapter 1, but they are also found, even if not explicitly, in the writings of the Cappadocian Saints, especially in the *Hexaemeron* of St. Basil the Great and in *On the Making of Man* by St. Gregory of Nyssa. Although the basis of patristic discourse is biblical revelation and ecclesial experience, and not exclusively the method of individual reasoning, nevertheless reason and knowledge of the rationality of the world come to confirm the truths of the Christian faith. In fact, the idea that would best focus the present work and the patristic conception of the relationship between faith and reason lies in the expression of St Gregory the Theologian: 'faith is the fulfilment of reason'. Both are gifts of God, even the noblest and highest, so there can be no real contradiction between them, if they are used correctly, according to their nature. And this, in the Cappadocian Saints, is the defining message of the relationship between faith and reason.

Also, analyzing the theological and anthropological premises of the act of embracing the faith, we have concluded that the Saint Fathers (and also the Cappadocian Saints), for one coming to faith, do not consider the calculation of reason or earthly logic as a priority, but the natural moral discernment (distinguishing good from evil) and the mind (*νοῦς*), as faculties of the rational part of man, but different from the logical-analytical function of reason, which is more suited to the method of science and which is limited to calculation and operations with impersonal meanings abstracted from the world through the experience of the senses. Having in his nature the distinction between good and evil, man also has in his nature the knowledge that God exists, and through the *νοῦς*, which is provided with a "noetic" (mental or spiritual) sense, man can also acquire the experience of intelligible or spiritual realities, i.e. he can experience divine grace or uncreated energies. But this feeling is given from above to the extent of purity of passions and to the extent of humility. These anthropological considerations, specifically Orthodox, have led Orthodox theology to speak more of the objective character of natural Revelation than of the systematization of the rational arguments for the existence of God.

However, the Cappadocian Saints also make rational arguments for the existence of God or Christian truth. That is, they use both logical-philosophical reasoning and knowledge of rationality and the laws of the world to confirm and strengthen truths of faith, making an inner connection between supernatural and natural revelation. For both nature and Scripture are books written by the same divine Author, and in them we find necessary and useful meanings for our development and salvation (an idea emphasized especially by St. Basil).

Establishing, therefore, the reason and the power of the arguments for the existence of God within the double framework determined both by the intrinsic logic of the limits of reason and by the anthropological premises of the faculty of reason, we conclude that the rational arguments for the existence of God, also developed by St. John Damascene in his *Dogmatic, Chapter III*, can still have an edifying value today in confirming and strengthening the faith. But taking into account those anthropological and logical premises outlined in chapters 1 and 2.

I can illustrate this conclusion with examples. Thus, in the *Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection*, St. Macrina takes up an argument of Socrates and, using the same *reductio ad*

absurdum method, shows that if blind chance were the principle by which the world was created, then this principle should have had maximum creative power or manifest its creative power even today. But this does not happen, so you cannot give chance this role in the origin of the universe and life. In its simplicity, this argument has a compelling force with logical clarity. Especially since it has never before been successfully countered. And it is worth noting that the law of entropy, a corollary of the second principle of thermodynamics, from which we know today that blind chance cannot by itself produce (or preserve) fixed order, is also implicitly used.

Another example I would offer from the *First Theological Discourse* (aka *Discourse 29*) of St. Gregory the Theologian. Here it is shown that there are logically three possibilities for the universe to have been founded: either by a single principle (*monarchy*), or by several principles (*polyarchy*), or by no principle (*anarchy*). (*Arche* meaning "principle" or "beginning" in Greek). Given that the universe is *kosmos*, i.e. permeated by order, which of its three possible causes is most consistent with the creation and preservation of order? Anarchy, the absence of any principle, as verified by anyone's experience, cannot produce anything stable, being a continual struggle between constituents, the erosion and division of one by another, while polyarchy means composition and therefore struggle waged between separate principles, again resulting in disunity, and therefore lack of order. The only logical conclusion, then, is that at the foundation of the world is a *monarchy*, a single principle. Which proves that neither blind chance (*anarchy* or chance, expressing atheism) nor polytheism (*polyarchy*) are the true causes of the order of the universe, but monotheism (*monarchy*). And again reason confirms the Christian faith.

And St. Basil concludes that the only "rational cause" of the universe can only be God, expressing himself in a way that remains valid today, after almost two centuries of unproven Darwinism: "These philosophers, not knowing God, did not lay at the foundation of the creation of the universe (τῆς γενέσεως τῶν ὄλων) a rational cause (αἰτίαν ἔμφρονα); but their ideas about the making of the world are the conclusions of their initial ignorance of God. Therefore some, in order to explain the making of the world, have run to material hypotheses, attributing to the elements of the world the cause of the creation of the universe..."¹⁸

An important strength of Cappadocian apologetics is the attention paid to "facts" as a testimony of faith. And by "facts" we mean both the reality of the order, rationality and "miracles" of creation, and the marvellous deeds performed by the Saviour on earth, by the Holy Apostles and other saints. It is not the speculations of philosophy and reason that have founded our faith, but the facts, St Gregory of Nyssa emphasises. The miracles that still happen today are also a witness to God, St Gregory the Theologian also points out. If there is miracle, then there is also God. Who is not a deistic God, meaning a Creator who has withdrawn from the world and no longer intervenes in it, but a loving Father who cares for His creatures. And the existence of evil in the world, however oppressive and tragic it may be or seem, does not contradict the existence of divine mercy. It is in this sense that we find the first Christian theodicy developed at length in St. Basil the Great.

And in the *Hexaemeron* St. Basil frequently testifies to the manifold manifestations of God's providence in nature, along with narratives about the intrinsic rationality of the world and the cleverness of living beings, i.e. the "wonders of creation". Therefore the "superabundance (ἡ περιουσία) of the wisdom of the world" is, like the Church and Holy Tradition, a sign and witness and school of the divine *Logos*.

Thus, rational arguments for the existence of God can bring clarity and light, but not in the rationalistic or scholastic sense, but in that they can somehow leave free of ideological

¹⁸ St. Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron I: II*, PSB 17, p. 73.

impurities the channels through which man accesses and is inspired by natural revelation. And they inspire by showing that there can be no contradiction between reason and faith.

The ultimate aim of this work was not to rationally ground faith (which is not possible to the end), but, by clear testimonies about the limits and effectiveness of reason which knows its limits, but also by patristic testimonies, to clear obstacles from the way of modern and solitary man towards natural Revelation, or even the way towards union in spirit with the Almighty *Logos*. Finally, "faith without deeds is dead" (*Jas. 2:26*).

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