

The state of things to come

The notion of truth between contemporary philosophy of language and fourth-century Eastern patristics

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Abstract: The Greek Fathers were not only authors of written texts, but also interpreters of pericopes read in the context of sacred rites. Liturgical performances included the proclamation, actualization and transposition of certain passages of Holy Scripture. A central role was played by the homily (ὁμιλία). Especially since the fourth century, the homily was a type of representation that complemented the reference of biblical statements: it functioned iconically, showing the truth value of scriptural phrases as images of things to come. According to Fathers like Maximus the Confessor, truth was no longer the correspondence between language and facts (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*), but the relationship between shadows, icons and archetype. If one accepts such an account, the question becomes relevant: “What form would a patristic theory of truth take today if we consider ontologically relevant the very process by which truth is constructed within and through that form of life?” Some modern orthodox philosophers such as John Zizioulas, Vladimir Lossky or Christos Yannaras, argue that Christian germinal liturgies were standing in for theories (θεωρίαι) linking historical reality with truth emerging as a “person in communion” with God’s Trinitarian life. Individual hearers experienced their true ontological status as persons through the performative use of languages and the homily as icon.

Keywords: truth; Bible; Patristic philosophy; late antique liturgy; Byzantine icons.

1. Proposal

The main task of my paper is paying attention to two crucial notions usually present in our discourses on patristics as well as in some other fields of both human sciences and the philosophy of lan-

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¹ The present article stems from the paper (up to now unpublished) I gave at the Annual Meeting of NAPS (= The North American Patristic Society) at the Hyatt Regency, Chicago, May 26-28, 2016; For the reader’s convenience, I have reproduced here, in abridged form, some arguments of La Matina (2015).

guage. The first is ‘truth’ (Greek ἀλήθεια) and the second is ‘person’ (Greek πρόσωπον): the former is of a very common usage as well in our practices as in many theories of language. On the contrary, the latter circulates in many scientific contexts with no unequivocal meaning². In many cases ‘person’ (or a translation of it) is used as a convenient synonym for ‘individual’. The sense we would investigate here is that which emerges in the writings of the Greek Fathers especially in the Late Antiquity. My aim is to reconcile the notion of truth, as theorised by logicians and philosophers of language, with Jesus Christ’s portentous claim that “I am the Truth” (see *Gv* 14, 6). At first sight, it seems to be a desperate endeavour. Indeed, if truth and person are felt as notions covering a different range in separate fields, one can use or both or just one of them without troubling his audience or her subject matter. Problems do arise when, for instance in my case, one tries to combine or to overlap the pair of notions with one another in one and the same theoretical account; or, conversely, when one tries – it is not my case – to remove or the notion of truth or the notion of person from its account. How to build up a theory of truth and person capable of combining the linguistic dimension with the personal one?

Nevertheless, we would make at least one attempt. For the sake of conciseness, I will assume as well-known the works of logicians as Gottlob Frege and Alfred Tarski³. Contrarywise, the orthodox perspective on truth and language may be less familiar to Western readers. Therefore, I think I would focus my remarks, taking as an example of the Orthodox conception the work of John Zizioulas, a well-known and widely heard philosopher and theologian. Without pretending to an impossible exhaustiveness, I will make some remarks on the works richest in insights for our topic⁴. To begin with,

² On the different accounts of ‘person’ in both Ancient and Modern ages see Turcescu (2005a); see also La Matina (2011).

³ As to Frege, I usually refer to the essays collected in Frege (1967); as for Tarski, in addition to the works quoted hereafter, I would mention the works devoted to Tarski by Davidson (1984).

⁴ John Zizioulas’ work is familiar to Greek and English readers. His major works include: Zizioulas (1989/1990); see also Id. (1997), and the sequel (2007); his account on ontology and eschatology constitutes the more original feature of his position: see *à propos* Zizoulas (2012). Many articles and volumes are devoted to his work. *Exempli gratia*, I would mention here Duncan (2009).

let me wonder, “Do we really need a theory of truth and person? Should we make explicit the thoughts that help us while working on, say, our favourite texts and fathers and their lives though they are far away?” My first response is: No, we do not. The main reason is that we already have *some* theory while reading or interpreting the other’s sentences. We always make use of some theory – no matter how informal it is – but we do it unawares. So, the right form for the question is: “Do we really need to formulate a theory of truth and person, in addition to our naïve one?” “Should we formulate a theory according to some material and formal constraints?” Why not continue as in everyday life’s practices?”

My answer on this is: Yes, we need a theory, for if we do without, we cannot defend or support our interpretive moves. In fact, our interpretation is based upon the difference between mere beliefs and true beliefs⁵. I can believe there is a crocodile behind me: this is my belief. However, it is not but a belief of mine; things should not change unless I am able to share my belief with other people also present in the environment. The second reason is that, while coping with texts of any type – regardless of their distance in time or space –, we ordinarily state our interpretation by use of our own language⁶. We do it very often though in this case too mostly unawares. Such an overlapping of the language we *talk in* and the language we *talk about* does shadow the important role of languages as “ontological eye-opener”, for we tend to assign the other’s sentences the one and the same truth conditions. If this is so, then the twofold task of any theory is: (1) to make us aware of the distinction between belief and truth, and (2) to make it explicit we are riding on two languages.

It is never enough to stress such mostly invisible a gap between languages in which our interpretation is couched and languages

⁵ On this issue I find pertinent the arguments offered in three very fine essays by Davidson (2001a), (2001b) and (2001c).

⁶ In a previous work of mine (La Matina 2002) I focused on speaking or writing as acts of pairing the other’s string by means of a sort of transcription, no matter whether only an endosomatic one and/or a just homophonic one. I called my approach the ‘Editor Theory’; I argue that every act of communication (except for the so-called ‘irreflective speaking’) is such that in its interior a process takes place that can be described as analogous to the process through which an editor-philologist edits a text which is “distant” – in a sense to be explained – for him». The first attempt to build a theory based on the philological process of editing had been formulated in my first monograph, La Matina (1994).

about which our interpretation is pointing at. Let us think of the Greek Fathers. They did read and utter the New Testament in its Greek version, then they did write and comment the proclaimed texts in their own language, and it was Greek too. In their experience, the interpreting was the same as translating from Greek to Greek. When Gregory of Nyssa, so to say, uttered his homilies before his listeners, he practised a sort of homophonic translation. Our first theoretical requirement is that a theory aiming at scientifically interpreting the Greek Fathers' texts does cope with a notion of true beliefs as well as with the notion of homophonic translation.

2. *The Patristic Turn*

The western discovery of Greek Fathers is a very recent event. Of course, this renaissance is mostly due to the work of thinkers like Urs von Balthasar and Jean Daniélou, who rescued Greek Patristics and opened the mind of Occidental man towards both the epistemological and the philosophical heritage of the Eastern Christianity. By just indexing some newly appeared titles, the very catalyser factor of contemporary scholars is the Cappadocian (or Neo-Nicene) theology and philosophy, elaborated by Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. More recently, a very attractive issue is Cappadocian's philosophy of language (also termed 'Neo-Nicene'). Apart from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan formulae, such a Cappadocian "turn" emerges in Basil's books *Against Eunomius*, and in Gregory's three books against the same antagonist (*Contra Eunomium libri tres*), as well as in many other occasional talks and writings⁷. The writing *Ad Ablabium, Quod non sint tres dii*⁸ and the short discourse *Ad Graecos, de communibus notionibus* discuss the new "trinitarian semantics" of "God," proclaiming the threefold personhood of God the One⁹. The (recently vindicated to Gregory of Nyssa)¹⁰ famous *Epistle 38* introduces, on one side, the

⁷ As for the Greek Fathers' philosophy of language, namely on Gregory of Nyssa's approach to language, see La Matina (2010: 604-611).

⁸ See G. Maspero (2007).

⁹ See La Matina (2010a: 743-748); See also La Matina (2014).

¹⁰ See J. Zachhuber (2003: 73-90). See also: Hübner (1972: 463-490).

pivotal distinction of οὐσία and πρόσωπα, whilst, on the other side, maintains the logical equivalence among the notions of πρόσωπον and ὑπόστασις.

The question arises How to cope with sentences expressing some dogmatic truth? It seems rather a theological than philosophical ground of discussions. Nevertheless, some very interesting questions appear, that are relative to the difference between “grammatical sentences”, on one side, and “factual sentences”, on another¹¹. What a grammatical sentence gives us is information relative to a given concept. Just as an example: if one says that «There is no resurrection of the dead» (1 Cor 15, 12), then one learns nothing about the experience of resurrection, whilst he is informed on how he/she uses the concept of being dead. This is what Wittgenstein termed a grammatical sentence. On the contrary, when the Apostle Paul claimed that “It is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead” (1 Cor, 15-20), his Corinthian addressees became aware about both a unique historical datum and a given speech-act enouncing this given.

Nevertheless, Holy Scripture’s sentences are multifarious and could result in ambiguity in some respect; unfortunately, no theoretical framework is known that can teach the modern reader on how to recognize, among them, which ones are grammatical (in Wittgenstein’s sense), and which are not, without previously recognizing something as a logical structure. In addition to this, it is noticeable that most dogmata seem to be formulated as nonsensical propositions because of their striking grammar. Let me take as an example the Nicene-Constantinopolitan *Symbolon* assigning to the Christian God a very ‘opaque’ ontological commitment (τρία πρόσωπα, μία οὐσία, three persons, just one substance), on which Richard Cartwright once observed:

At this point I need to anticipate an objection. It will be said that a philosopher is trespassing on the territory of the theologian: the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery; beyond the capacities of human reason, and hence the tools of logics are irrelevant to it. The objection is based on a misunderstanding. The doctrine of the Trinity is indeed supposed to be a mystery. That simply means however that assurance of its truth cannot be provided by human reason but only by divine revelation. (...) Nor is a mystery supposed to be unintelligible, in

¹¹ The paired notions were clearly formulated by Wittgenstein (1958).

the sense that the words in which it is expressed simply cannot be understood. After all, we are asked to believe the propositions expressed by the words, not simply that the words express such true propositions or other, we know not which¹².

In case we would share Cartwright's claim, then admittedly we are not requested to believe the sounds or the written words; contrariwise, we are demanded to assent to their content. Accordingly, we are invited to search for any possible device allowing us the correct understanding of what we assent to. Suppose, moreover, a jokingly stated dogma, claiming "*God is a square circle*", has been once accepted as true by a given community of believers in the fourth century. Of course, from a logical point of view it seems nonsensical for it commits to unacceptable semantics. On the other hand, since no evidence can either support or disconfirm such a claim, the believers go straight on. Independently of these ones, let us imagine another community of believers held true the same sentence, as manifesting, so to say, some portentous truth about the *unconceivable* nature of God. Such believers, however, do accept the sentence not for they have some grasp of its meaning, but exactly for they do not. "God's form – one is tempted to paraphrase – does trespass the boundaries of human knowledge," so everything can be said. This is an amazing case, for we are hurting here at two different utterances, both somehow involving some Godhead by means of one and the same term 'God': are they hereby synonym utterances? I think they are not. Though homophonic as to the Signifier, nevertheless they differ in truth. The former is a nonsense, for it is not seriously uttered, whilst the latter is a nonsense for its meaning, if any, is out of range. Despite this double-face nonsense, each utterance is accepted by its own group, *in force of its use*, not by virtue of its form or meaning. No constant meaning or shared truth-conditions are here formulated. Meaning or truth do overlap to the notion of *use*.

This means that, if we have some propensity for (what one could call) *sentence-oriented* approaches, then an intruding worry there is on how to find evidence for checking the meaning of sentences such as this. Furthermore, it must be set on which formal and/or empirical bases one could take such homophonic statements as nonsensical. Unlikely, if we are close to endorse a "*person*"-oriented

¹² Cartwright (1990: 87-200).

account of truth and meaning, we could be inclined to recognize that liturgies are very complicate language-games, where players are not mere executors of the rule but – as Franco Lo Piparo¹³ argued – are part of it. If meaning and truth depend on their use, then any word in a sentence can *thereby* relate to some move of the given language-game. In this case, evidence is based on the form of life the language-move belongs to, as well as on the language-game it exists within.

3. *To be true-of*

We will see later what can be done by applying a person-oriented notion of truth. Now, to begin with, let us show how things go if we decide to use a *sentence-based* approach and the notion of reference by applying it across the board. Speaking in plain terms, scriptural sentences are very similar to any sentence of whatsoever text. When one considers the predicate “true” as alike-in-meaning as the predicate “true-of something”, the place where language meets the world is fixed through the notion of reference¹⁴. For simplicity’s sake, let us take “To be a Jesus’-follower” as non-structured general term. According to both Frege’s method, any sentence “*Peter* is a Jesus’ follower” is true, if the predicate “To be a Jesus’ follower (ξ)” is true-of some given individual named by “*Peter*.” The proper noun “*Peter*” replaces the symbol ‘ ξ .’ As perhaps it is shown by our simple case, modern logic takes both meaning and truth of any sentence as proceeding together.

Things do change with *complex sentences*, for the scope – or domain – of their (complex) predicates could consist of objects for which we could not possess any proper name. “How do we refer to such an unnamed host of followers?” Let me take the open sentence “ ξ is a follower”: and suppose we have now a context-free sentence like the following one (1): “*Each one, who is a Jesus’ follower, is a Jesus’ disciple.*” Evidently, the truth-conditions for such a complex

¹³ See Lo Piparo (2014).

¹⁴ «The question (about reference) is whether it is *the*, or at least one, place where there is direct contact between linguistic theory and events, actions, objects described in non-linguistic terms» Donald Davidson (2001d: 219).

sentence cannot be stated by means of a list of proper nouns replacing the variables, for we do not know how many objects the given predicate is *true-of*. So, the symbolisation: (1 bis) “For any ξ , if (ξ ‘is a Jesus’ follower’), then (ξ ‘is a Jesus’ disciple’)”, does not tell anything about the boundaries of the membership of Jesus’ followers and/or disciples. Since the complex (1 bis) has the form of a universally quantified sentence, it is useless for the purposes of our game. One wonders where the further affected objects are to be found. Or, again, whether a method can derive from the platitude expressed by the (1), a wider-range application of the truth-conditions. As we have learned by Dummett, the complex sentences are obtained from complex of dismembered sentences, through a “stage-by-stage process of construction”. As for our example, the problem remains how is it possible that we hold true the wide-range sentence, provided we do not know all the names of all the objects that given predicate was true-of?

Frege’s and Dummett’s complex sentences could be taken as a trigger for watching the link between semantic and, as we have proposed to call them, homiletic theories of truth. However, theorizing truth according to Christian forms of life requests more than a theory of propositional truth. This seems possible by looking closely at the liturgical vision that emerges from the study of the Greek Fathers. As we shall see, Alfred Tarski’s theories of truth are also a useful starting point. Provided, however, that the notation is extended to include (almost) the reality of the grammatical person. To do this, we need to abandon the plane of sentence (the only one considered by Tarski) and involve the plane of enunciation into our approach. This will encompass the study of the homily as a liturgical form of enunciation¹⁵.

¹⁵ The notion of enunciation was introduced and formulated in a definite way by the Sephardic linguist and semiologist Emile Benveniste. His essays are considered fundamental to the study of language. In particular, see the study «L’appareil formel de l’énonciation», in *Langage*, 1970, 17, pp. 12-18 and the essays collected in Émile Benveniste (1976: 1, 225-236; 258-266). Among the studies on enunciation, I like to point out Manetti (2008). With the development of semiotics, Benveniste’s notion has also been applied to areas other than verbal language. Today we speak fluently of enunciation in painting, film, and so on. Following this line of thought, in many of our works we have used the category of enunciation in this expanded sense. Therefore, when we talk about liturgical enunciation, we do not mean to refer only to linguistic facies, but we involve the relationship (σχέσις) between participants in the rite. On this La Matina (2022).

4. Zizioulas' person-based approach to truth.

Until now we worked with a notion of truth relative to the sentence plan of human languages. This propositional notion of truth does neither capture what is interesting in the homiletic production of the Fathers, nor the processes involved in the production of discourse within the contexts of the liturgy. The sentence-oriented theories of truth do make no use of the notion of person, and it is a well-known fact that many philosophers of language disregard completely any notion of πρόσωπον, *persona* or personhood. Now we would try a different method, taking into consideration the grammatical notion of person: 'I', 'You', 'It'. This move involves the context of enunciation in the analysis. For the enunciation theorists perspective, *True* is not yet alike-in-meaning as *True-of* something, for it expresses a relation among the speaker, his uttered sentence, and the occasion for uttering such a sentence (not to count here the second person, the addressee)¹⁶.

As for the Greek Fathers, this relation is better understood if one takes attention to the Divine Liturgy's homiletic context and its notion of truth. The question is now: "What is truth in a Christian orthodox liturgy?" Perhaps, a response could emerge from the work of John Zizioulas, which I want to talk a little bit about. Zizioulas attempts to rescue the notion of 'person' by removing any personalistic relics due to the French theories by Sartre. Anyway, it leaves us with not but bundles of crucial though unanswered questions. If so, why the work by John Zizioulas is so relevant a work in our eyes? I will argument my thesis with help of some passages by him. Of course, Zizioulas' person-oriented theory of truth makes no use of any notion somehow connected to the philosophy of language or any formal method for analytically processing sentences or utterances. He is interested in person, truth and liturgical communication as a theologian and as a patrologist. His approach, however, is "ready-made", we might say. It would be enough for Western philosophers to look in it; however, in their eyes the matter does not merit philosophical inquiries¹⁷.

¹⁶ A very original move in this direction was made by Donald Davidson (1984: 17-36), in his seminal paper "Truth and Meaning".

¹⁷ It is partly in response to that urgency that I accepted in 2015 Professor Giulio Maspero's invitation to write on these issues. See *La Matina* (2010: 604-611) and (2010a: 743-748).

Among the causes of Occidental disinterest in the notion of person – as a keyword for a theory of truth – there is certainly the confusion in using words as ‘person’ and ‘individual’; in common sense they are practically synonymous. Not so in Greek philosophy and patristic theology, where the individual is every genuine specimen belonging to a species, while person is something different, having to do with the notion of σχέσις, relation¹⁸. For the Orthodox theologian, as for much of Byzantine philosophy, there is an ontological relationship between truth and person, and this stems from the Trinitarian life. Indeed, Zizioulas writes that: «There is no model for the proper relation between communion and otherness either for the Church or for the human being other than the Trinitarian God» (2007: 4)¹⁹.

The overlapping of person and individual – which have become virtually synonymous – has created a profound misunderstanding of personal ontology in Western culture²⁰. One could claim that what we called a ‘personal truth’ needs not be grounded in a political principle or a shared ethical vision, as often happens²¹. However, this would be unacceptable from the orthodox point of view. Assuming that it is possible to construct a theory on ethical or bioethical, or political basis, this would not meet the requirements set by late antique, Byzantine and modern patristic philosophy. Indeed, in all these cases the relationship between truth and person would stop at the *ontic* level (a convention, a code, a rule, a system, a law), without determining *ontological* commitments ca-

¹⁸ See on this Yannaras (1984: 22-23). «In everyday life, too, we generally distinguish persons by applying to individuals the characteristics and attributes common to human nature, with merely quantitative differentiations. When we want to designate a person, we make a collection of individual attributes and natural characteristics which are never “personal” in the sense of being unique and unrepeatable, however fine the quantitative nuances we achieve for designating individuals».

¹⁹ See also the statement: «Christ is the only one that can guarantee the ontological truth, the eternal survival, of every being we regard as unique and indispensable, for he is the only one in whom death, which threatens the particular with extinction, is overcome»; Zizioulas (2007: 75).

²⁰ As Zizioulas wrote: «Individualism is present in the very foundation of this culture. Ever since Boethius in the fifth century identified the person with the individual (‘person is an individual substance of a rational nature’))» (Zizioulas, 2007: 1).

²¹ See, for example, Robert Spaemann’s (1996) attempt to theorize about ‘person’ by use of just western sources and neglecting the contribution of the Eastern writers, theologians and philosophers, not to count the Greek and Russian Fathers.

pable of being grounded in a “truthfulness” independent of some stipulational judgment. According to Zizioulas, «If otherness is not somehow qualified with communion, it can hardly produce a satisfactory culture. In any case, neither otherness nor communion can be valid solely on ethical grounds; they must be related to the truth of existence» (Zizioulas, 2007: 14).

Which are the keywords for a personalist notion of truth in the orthodox philosophy’s sense? First, one must mention *Otherness*. It has profound significance on the level of constructing a theory of truth in the personalist sense. For, moving from the individual of any species one can infer some property belonging to the species, moving from the person this cannot be done, for person is absolute otherness. «Otherness – Zizioulas says – is a notion that, in its absolute sense, that is, in its truth, excludes generalizations of all kinds» (ivi: 69).

Another is the distinctive pair ‘*Nature/Person*’, which is virtually unknown in Western Christian philosophy. For a Greek orthodox philosopher, the personal dimension is that which also transcends the natural limit of things. Not only is the person not the individual, but it can be said that ‘person’ is not even a term for which a real definition can be given. We share in this regard the words of an Eastern philosopher and theologian, who wrote that “person” signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature²². As a consequence of this, the orthodox thinkers consider that nature never has the last word when it comes to truth. Truth belongs to the order of the person. Thus Zizioulas: «The truth of the world’s being would be located not in nature but in personhood» (ivi: 19). All that has been said so far also concerns the relationship that verbal language, on the one hand, and the languages of art, on the other, can give of life and its truth; and it is again the Greek theologian who reminds us of this:

²² This formula is by Vladimir Lossky (1974: 120). The correct interpretation of Lossky’s statement is to be stressed here: as Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury) pointed out «“person” signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature – “irreducibility” and not “something irreducible” or “something which makes man irreducible to his nature” precisely because it cannot be a question here of “something” distinct from “another nature” but of someone who is distinct from his own nature, of someone who goes beyond his nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping of it», R. Williams (2012).

In the long history of art, various philosophical ideas have determined its relationship to ontology, to the truth of being. In the patristic period and in Byzantium in particular, such ideas include, on the one hand, the idea that nature and matter are representable artistically only in and through their connection or relation with personhood, and, on the other hand, the idea that the object of art is to combine form and matter in order to bring forth the eschatological truth of creation, that is, the state of existence which is liberated from death (ivi: 96).

5. “*Truth is the state of things to come*”

Thus, having eliminated, or rather limited, the notion of the individual, Zizioulas’ personal ontology tends to account for the share of otherness that is present in the relationship and that suggests the transcendence of the real (not just nature, then). There is an excess that manifests itself as otherness and makes it impossible to have absolute control over the real that expresses itself in perception and relation. Thus, another keyword is *Signifier*. Orthodox liturgy is a form of life unimaginable to a Westerner. It is completely entrusted to the play and the intersemiotic translation of signifiers into other signifiers. There is nothing in it that can lay in favour of meaning, as is sadly the case in modern Western liturgies. Zizioulas writes: «It is with the signifier rather than the signified that we should be preoccupied» (ivi: 117), and, in another passage: «Reality is a ceaseless movement from signifier to signifier, a multiplicity marked by difference and heterogeneity, bereft of origin and purpose» (ivi: 52). Truth then has to do with the *incessant translation of one signifier into another signifier*²³, rather than with the construction of a semantics of the real. The whole world is pervaded by this form of semiosis of the signifier. Here we touch the heart of Zizioulas’ conception of truth.

A very important keyword is *Symbol*. Nothing could be understood about Greek patristics if one does not take note of the difference from the Latin one with regard to the way of understanding the process of signification. Sign-based approaches are prevalent mainly in the Western world, whereas in the meaningful universe

²³ Reference is made here to the famous definition «le sujet est représenté par un signifiant pour un autre signifiant» by Jacques Lacan (1966: 819).

of the Greek Fathers first and the Byzantines later, they are not. The process of sense production is not a semiotic phenomenon, but rather a symbolic and iconic reality. The Byzantine world is not inhabited by *signa* denoting *res*²⁴, but by the special relationship from Icons to Archetypes (or Prototypes). A line between the two ways should be interposed. According to western theories, signs do refer to meaning as ‘the’ absent thing spoken of; instead, for the Greek Fathers, symbols have an iconic function. They reveal the hidden presence of a relationship (σχέσις) between *the persons spoken-of (or acted-upon)* in the sentence-plan, on the one side, and, on the other *the persons speaking-to (or acting-with) in the enunciation-plane*²⁵. Although these signifiers are real in both icons and liturgy, they represent a prototype or archetype signifier. Another difference is as follows. While signs very often require prearranged and shared rules of use, this is not true as for symbols. Then, we will say that, on the one hand, signs are founded as rational entities – they actualize the *signans/signatum* relationship – whilst symbols, on the other, are constituted in the orthodox perspective as a relational space of existence among persons: instead of determining a meaning or referent, the symbol lets when the signifiers do emerge as a *chronotope*²⁶.

The prevalence, since the Scholastics, of meaning over signifier may be due to the unsensitiveness toward the ritual aspects of languages that has occurred in Western theology and church practice. This desensitizing progressively affected the whole educated West. Consequently, the word ‘liturgy’ is not understood today but as a term about the devotional practices of Christians. Instead, what we call Liturgy here is an iconic action that obeys two necessary though not sufficient conditions: first, its symbols of liturgy must function as icons; and second, the iconic action must be performed by persons insofar as they appear as grammatical persons. This means that the persons of the enunciation are involved in the action as icons of the persons of God, that is, to the extent that they exemplify the actions of the Triune Godhead.

²⁴ On the debt of Western culture to the semiotic work of St. Augustine, I would refer to the fine work of Giovanni Manetti (1987).

²⁵ The word ‘enunciation’ is used here in the broader sense explained in footnote n. 15.

²⁶ The term is taken from Bakhtin’s theory of literature; see Bakhtin, (1981: 84-85).

Symbols do work iconically in the liturgical life. Gregory wrote *De Vita Moysis* to provide one of his readers with an example of perfection to imitate. (*Vita Moys.* I, 6, 8-14). And, anticipating a possible objection from the reader, he wonders: “How to imitate the life of Moses and achieve perfection²⁷, provided that neither one could choose to live the life of Moses nor there exist now Pharaohs or Chaldeans or golden calves in the IV century?” The answer is rather focused on the conditions of truth than on the meaning of the historical narrative. In the patristic sense, truth is not just a matter of fact, for God could speak at any time to anyone who would listen: the truth does not belong only to past times, so the Bible tales admit of a supplement of efficacy. In *De vita Moysis* 1. 11 Gregory of Nyssa recommended his readers to use the Holy Scripture as a symbol (Δοκεῖ δέ μοι καλῶς ἔχειν τῇ Γραφῇ περὶ τούτου συμβούλω χρήσασθαι). Maximus the Confessor, in *Περὶ διαφορῶν ἀποριῶν* (p. 592) explained this in detail: «The Old Testament being a symbol of action and virtue, [...] the whole mystery of salvation was wisely dispensed through shadows, through icons and truth. For the *Torah* was a shadow, as the divine Apostle said, of future goods, not the image of things, [...] but the Gospel is an image of the true, it has the likeness of the true»²⁸. The symbols of the Old Testament and the New function respectively as shadows and as icons of truth. But what is meant by Maximus by truth?

John Zizioulas pays great attention to a problematic passage by Maximus the Confessor. The latter, in the text of the scholia to a work by Dionysius Areopagite, proposes an eschatological ontology, which takes the terms “nature” (= φύσις) and “hypostasis” (= πρόσωπον or ὑπόστασις) in eschatological sense. Unlike the previous philosophical tradition (which he knew quite well), Maximus connects truth not with the past (as in Plato, for example), but with the future, with the reality that is envisaged as the time to come, that is, life in the kingdom of God. Here you are the passage in parole according to the English translation:

²⁷ One should pay attention to the paradoxical condition of the listeners: they are invited to (but do not really can) imitate the perfect life. See e.g., *Vita Moys.*, I, 6, 4: «πῶς μιμήσωμαι;» and also II, 47, 5 ff. «ἀδύνατον δι' αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων ... μιμήσασθαι».

²⁸ The concept is also found elsewhere in Maximus. See. For example (p. 612): Καὶ αὐτὰ δὲ πάλιν τῷ τε παρόντι καὶ τῷ μέλλοντι διαιροῦνται, ὡς σκιὰν ἔχουσαι καὶ ἀλήθειαν, καὶ τύπον καὶ ἀρχετυπίαν.

(The Areopagite) calls “images (*eikones*) of what is true” the rites that are now performed in the synaxis [...] for these things are symbols, not the truth [...] “From the effects” [ἀπὸ τῶν αἰτιατῶν, “from the effects”]. That is, from what is accomplished visibly to the things that are unseen and secret, which are the causes and archetypes of things perceptible. For those things are called ‘effects’ which in no way owe the cause of their being to anything else. Or from the effects to the causes, that is, from the imperfect to the more perfect, from the type to the image; and from the image to the truth. For the things of the Old Testament are the shadow (*skià*), the things of the New Testament are the image (*eikòn*). The truth is the state of things to come [ἀλήθεια δὲ ἡ τῶν μελλόντων κατάστασις]²⁹.

John Zizioulas takes Maximus’ expression (“truth is the condition of future things”) as showing how Greek patristics overturned the Platonic concept of causality. The relationship between Icon and Archetype (or Prototype) might recall the one, expressed in similar terms by Plato in his writings and by the later philosophers who continued his teaching. In Platonism, however, the archetype logically precedes the Icon, as a historical reality, atemporal form. Maximus says something different. Commenting on the writings (pseudepigraphs) attributed to Dionysius, he states that the relationship between symbols and realities can be thought of in two ways: either as a transition from sensible symbols (τῶν αἰσθητῶν συμβόλων) to intelligible realities (ἐπὶ τὰ νοητά) and, from these, to spiritual ones (καὶ νοερά). A transition there exists from less perfect things to more perfect things (for example, from types to icon and from icon to truth.). Here is the crucial statement, “The symbols of the Ancient Testament are shadow (σκιά), those of the New Testament icon (εἰκῶν); the truth is the state of things to come”. According to Zizioulas, in the icon – as in the liturgy – the reality of the archetype is found in future time. Everything happens as if the future condition would cause the condition depicted in the icon and celebrated in the Eucharistic liturgy. Unlike classical Greek culture,

²⁹ J. Zizioulas (1989/90: 20-21). Zizioulas quotes Maximus’ text from Migne’s edition of *Patrologia - Series Graeca*, vol. III, coll. 369 ff. I note *en passant* that Migne’s text contains an error: the word αἰτια should be corrected to αἰτιατά (because of PG, III 2). The correct statement should therefore be wanting to say that “Are called effects (αἰτιατά) those things which have in an elsewhere the cause of their being in a certain way.” However, this error does not undermine Zizioulas’ thesis. On this issue I refer to a paper of mine, “Notes on Maximus’ *Scholion in librum ‘De ecclesiastica hierarchia’* Γ. § 1 and 2” (forthcoming).

ancient and modern Patristics related truth not to an ontology of individuals, but to a personal ontology. Zizioulas writes: «The truth of any particular thing was removed from its particularity and placed on the level of a universal form in which the particular participated: the thing itself passes away but its form shared by more than one particular thing survives» (Zizioulas, 2007: 02) In liturgical life, an exceptionally important aspect that is often overlooked is the homily (ὁμιλία). As happens for the whole complex of the Christian Liturgy, also homily functions iconically.

6. *Truth and homily (ὁμιλία) in ancient times*

The scholar which in modern times investigated both the word and the reference of ὁμιλία was Maurice Sachot. He considers such a practice as derived from the so-called “Synagogue Proclamation”. Both in Hebrew and in Christian rites, the proclamation had a more structured architecture, composed of three readings. The first one was taken from the *Torah*, and the second from the Prophets. Homily (Hebrew’s *derashà*) was seen as the conclusion of the rite as well as the fulfilment itself of history and prophecy. Sachot shows that proclamation is a complex space of symbolisation, where the notion itself of *reference* is reformulated in terms of semantic *opaqueness*:

The “world”, understood as the total reality of which man, individually and collectively, is a part, is not an immediate fact, an external and objectifiable environment, as the sciences make it known to us: the experience of exile has made it possible to distance it. In relation to the biblical texts, then, the tripartite articulation puts it at a distance: to be a saying about the “world”, the word of truth (the homily) is stated as a saying about a written word (the Torah) through another written word (the Prophets)³⁰.

Moreover, since its earlier times homily did produce a very astonishing iconic action, for its truth-conditions did not depend on being a given sentence true to the facts, as in any theory of truth as correspondence. As for Zizioulas, so for Sachot, truth is not mere matter of past, for it springs from the future time which the Christian homily has just inaugurated; he argues:

³⁰ M. Sachot (1998: 35-36). My translation.

Truth is not contained in a definitive way in the Torah. It results from a confrontation with a text (...). It is therefore not closed; it does not belong to the past. The Torah is and remains an absolute and inherently unsurpassable reference text. But its text now belongs to the past. It is no longer modified to adapt it to the present situation. (But, as the text of the Prophets is also considered closed, it can only be a word for today if it is effectively replaced by a new utterance, an utterance in the strict sense of the word, which, while claiming to be only its accomplishment, is at the same time an overcoming of it. This is precisely what the homily is³¹).

Translating this process in semiotic terms, the matter may become more intriguing. The basic sentences of *Torah* and *Prophets* were *close* sentences, for their predicates were true-of the given historical individuals referred to by proper names and descriptions. How to apply them to any new case of, say, “*being a Jesus’ follower*”? The homily did so. During the homiletic discourse, the proclaimed phrases of the Torah or the Prophets were truly reopened; thus, they functioned as icons referring to the future time. Homily’s task was, on the one side, removing the historical names, so that life did become a sort of filling-in the blanks by use of true persons instead of solely disembodied symbols; on the other hand, it showed the incompleteness of past and directed attention toward the messianic expectation of the Kingdom. Truth was about future things. It was not given as property of propositions true to the facts. Patristic truth was not *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, as – a few centuries later – in the Aquinas. The iconic model of the late antique homily is found in the Gospels. Both the Twelve and the disciples did imitate Christ in his ὁμιλεῖν. Both the Apostle Paul and the earlier bishops did imitate Christ in the same way. In fact, the more the Fathers were true homilists the more they were true followers of Jesus. The biblical text was accompanied by a “paired” text³², which was charged with showing its truth conditions. It was during the fourth century that Christian homiletics assumed the genuine form of a theory for determining the truth-conditions of the Scripture’s sentences.

³¹ Sachot (1998: 36). My translation.

³² See La Matina (2001).

7. *Homily as a person-based truth-theory*

If we take the sequence of Text (*Torah, Prophets, on the one hand*, and *Homily* on the other hand), we shall see that the second segment both contains and names the first one, so pairing two sentences: one from the Scripture and the other equivalent – or better, *same-saying with the scripture's one*. The homily does give the *Torah's* or *Prophets'* sentences (= *p*) a doubled utterance (= *h*) structured as follows:

‘*p*’ is true, if *h*,

where ‘*p*’ is the sacred text, which is proclaimed, and *h* is the paired sentence taken by the homilist as equivalent or *same-saying*³³ with the first one. If things are seen this way, then *homileîn* works as an icon, searching for a demonstration of the truth-condition of the given sentence ‘*p*’. There is a difference between *p* (the quoted sentence) and *h* (the disquoted icon obtained through homily). It lies in that I know by acquaintance that *h* is true, for *h* is expressed in my own language, that is, the liturgical language functioning iconically. The sentence ‘*p*’ on the left is couched in the other’s language, i. e., in *Torah's* and *Prophets'* language. Now, if one watches carefully at the complex «‘*p*’ is true, if *h*», she easily might note that the formula is very similar to the so called Truth-Convention (or T-Convention) elaborated by the logician Alfred Tarski, «‘*p*’ is true if, and only if, *e*»³⁴. If we accept such a Tarski-style reading of the *proclamation form* (both the synagogue’s and the ecclesial ones), we could realise that homily as such accomplishes the task of showing the truth-conditions of some proclaimed sentence (bundle of sentences). And it does this, typically, by disquoting the *Torah's* and *Prophets'* sentences, and transposing them in icons of things to come.

Of course, the differences with the Tarskian model do remain; however, it is hard to deny the similarities between the T-Convention and the formula we have proposed: the late-antique homily worked as

³³ The expression “same-saying” is used as a technical notion by Donald Davidson in his quotational approach to *oratio obliqua*. See Davidson (1984: 93-108).

³⁴ Tarski’s seminal talk, by title “The Establishment of Scientific Semantics,” was held in 1933 in form of an address given at the International Congress of Scientific Philosophy in Paris, appeared in 1935; now in Tarski (1956: 401-408).

a means in some way capable of removing the quotation marks from Torah' and Prophets' proclaimed sentences. In sum, the content of a homilist was *assigning* the original person cited in the Holy Scripture *a new pronominal reference*, and transposing the new open sentence in some liturgical language (icons, gestures, formulas and so on). Understanding the performed homily was the same as (a) establishing which had to be the reference of indexicals was for the disquoted sentences to be true of someone, and, consequently, (b) to grasp out how they could function iconically as true in “the state of thing to come”. In this sense – as we wrote in 2015 – the homiletic truth was a fragment of a person-based and truth-theory yet to be built.

8. *Conclusory Remarks*

We live always under the eye of the other, of an image, as well in the real as in the virtual world. The Internet conceals and perhaps does not disclose but substitutes the reality of beings by means of simple avatars. The worldwide networks do not invite to communion but rather to connection. Patristics (and its notion of personal truth) could become a very means for flying away from the impersonal web, through the rescue of personal images as Icons. At the end, let me resume the meaning of what we have wanted to say so far, by using the words of the philosopher Χρήστος Γιανναράς:

The Greek East understood the image as a means for expressing the truth of persons and things, and spoke an iconic language that signified the disclosure of the person of God and the person of humankind. Image is the signifier of personal relation, the “logical” disclosure of personal energy as invitation to communion and relation. (...) It does not represent a static signified thing or substance, or substitute a reality or fact simply by an example, but discloses a personal energy invitatory to communion and relation, and preserves the character of knowledge as a fact of dynamic relation³⁵.

The byzantine liturgy of the early centuries functioned iconically. It was through the discovering of Icons that one shaped a true gaze on the life. Icons, homilies and liturgic agency represent the person: so, they are *true images of the coming world* where no individuals there exist but only persons. Icons presuppose the personal dimension and, where this is lacking or damaged, they institute it.

³⁵ Χρήστος Γιανναράς [Christos Yannaras] (2007: 184).

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