

Chapter One

ESCHATOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

Introduction

1. Ontology and Theology

What does accepting the apostolic *kerygma* of Christ's Resurrection and the entrance of the "last days" into history mean for our *being*, our existence, and the existence of the world? The concept of being is not merely an academic subject; it does not refer to "metaphysics," a speculative description of the ultimate structure of reality, but to the most fundamental and *experienced* "fact" of existence in its universal and unshakeable inevitableness. The place that the verb "to be" occupies, since ancient times, in the structure of all our Western languages witnesses to the foundational character of being in the basic and commonest expressions of our culture. As Heidegger, in referring to the structure of our Western languages, has observed, "the little word 'is' which speaks everywhere in our language and tells of being, even when it does not appear expressly, contains the whole destiny of being—from the *ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι* of Parmenides" to our own time.¹ Our way of thinking in Western cul-

¹ M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 73. The fact that there have been different ways of understanding being from the classical times to the present, including recent attempts to reject ontology altogether in contemporary thinking (see the Introduction to this book), does not undermine or expunge the notion of being from our thought and language.

The "traditionalist" view which advocates a theology free from or uninterested in the concept of being overlooks the obvious omnipresence of the verb "to be," and thus of ontology, in every thought we make or sentence we compose. The idea of a "canon of faith" free from an explicit or implicit presence of ontology is a myth inspired and invented by anti-philosophical, confessionalist purism, totally unfounded in history. Already within the time range of the formation of the Bible and during the entire course of the patristic period, the "canon of faith" was constantly reinterpreted and cast in the philosophical idiom of each particular time, the concept of being always playing a key

ture is structured and revolves around the verb *to be*, and if Christian theology wishes to interpret the Gospel in this culture, it cannot but express itself in ontological terms.

The employment of ontological categories had become a hermeneutical necessity for theology already at the time of the encounter of Judaism with Hellenistic culture. Ontological terminology with reference to God appears clearly in the translation of the Bible in the Septuagint where the intentionally obscure self-designation of God in the book of Exodus (3:14) is translated into Greek as ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ὁ ὢν or ὁ ὢν (“I am the one who is” or “the Being One”). This way of referring to God established itself among the Greek-speaking Jews of the Hellenistic period when thinkers like Philo employed it with noticeable frequency.² Although this way of referring to God remained for the Jews a fixed formula which was repeated without a philosophical explanation, the exchange at times (e.g., by Philo) of ὁ ὢν with τὸ ὄν reveals a tendency, at least among the Jewish intelligentsia, to interpret the formula in a philosophical (Platonic) sense.³

The New Testament retains the Exodus formula undeclinable and without explanation in the book of Revelation (1:8, 4:8, 11:17)—ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος—sometimes combined with the word παντοκράτωρ as an expression of the supra-temporality and deity of God.⁴ The ontological content of the formula becomes more evident when it is applied to Christ in the Gospel of St John in the form of ἐγὼ εἰμὶ as Jesus’ self-designation (Jn 8:24, 28, 8:58, 13:19). In chapter 8 verse 58 in particular, the ontological sense of the formula is implied in the contrast between Christ and Abraham with the verb “to be” (εἰμὶ) applied to the former and “to become” (γενέσθαι) to the latter: πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμὶ. Similarly, in another passage

role in the process. This did not result in a “Hellenization of Christianity” but rather in the “Christianization of Hellenism” (Florovsky), thanks to the hermeneutical ingeniousness of patristic thought. To restrict the hermeneutics of the apostolic *kerygma* to the past would be tantamount to turning it into a venerable but dead relic. Hermeneutics is the task of Christian theology also in our own time, in the context of a culture which continues to structure its way of thinking and its language around the verb “to be.”

² F. Büschel, “εἰμὶ, ὁ ὢν,” in G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II, (Michigan, MN: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 398.

³ M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, II (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 105, n. 372.

⁴ Büschel, “εἰμὶ, ὁ ὢν,” p. 398.

(8:24) the ἐγὼ εἰμὶ is contrasted with ἀποθανεῖσθε: “if you do not believe that ἐγὼ εἰμὶ, you will die (ἀποθανεῖσθε) in your sins.”

The designation of God in ontological terms with the ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ὁ ὢν formula is particularly used by the Greek fathers and in the Byzantine liturgy and art. Already in St Justin and the Apologists, the formula ὁ ὢν is not only present but often explicitly understood in a Platonic sense. In Justin, for example, God is described as “he who is always the same in himself and in relation to all things,”⁵ which is a direct reference to Plato.⁶ Origen continues in the same line,⁷ while the Cappadocians unhesitatingly apply to the ὁ ὢν formula the idea of being in its philosophical content. Thus, Gregory of Nazianzus can write that the designation of God as ὁ ὢν (or τὸ ὄν) is “the more strictly appropriate name for him ... making everything contemplated therein always the same, neither growing nor being consumed.”⁸ “The ἀεὶ ὢν, as he [God] calls himself, ... [is appropriate] because he possesses in himself the whole being (ὅλον τὸ εἶναι).”⁹ Similarly Gregory of Nyssa, in the same spirit, regards the notion of being as appropriate for God, because he contains the true being, and “it is not possible for anything to be unless it has its being (τὸ εἶναι) in the one that is (ἐν τῷ ὄντι).”¹⁰ In the same line, Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century will make use of the ὁ ὢν formula in order to clarify the notion of being by distinguishing it from that of essence: in the Exodus self-designation, God does not say “I am the essence” but “I am the who is,” “the one who encompasses all being.”¹¹ Theology has nothing to say about the *essence* of God, but this does not mean that it cannot refer to the being of God. The ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ὁ ὢν does not exclude ontology but its identification with ousiology.

All this is reflected in the liturgical life of the Church where the Exodus designation of God occupies a central place, at least in the East. This is evident in the eucharistic liturgies which bear the names of Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, both of them going back

⁵ Justin, *Dial.* 3.5 (PG 6:481B). Cf. Athenagoras, *Leg.* 4.2 (PG 6:900A).

⁶ Plato, *Republic* 6.4846.

⁷ Origen, *de princ.* I 3.5 (PG 11:150B).

⁸ Gregory Naz., *Or.* 30.18 (PG 36:128A).

⁹ Gregory Naz., *Or.* 45.3 (PG 36:635C).

¹⁰ Gregory Nys., *Or. cat.* 25 (PG 45:65D).

¹¹ Gregory Palamas, *Triads*, III, 2.12.