Nekrotes and *thanatos*. Considerations regarding the terminology and the meaning of death in Christianity

Rodica POP

Nekrotes et thanatos sont deux termes qui, dans l'ancienne langue grecque, parlent des visions que le christianisme avait sur la mort. Nekrotes, comme mort salvatrice de l'homme chassé du paradis, situé loin de la source du Bien Suprême, porteur des „vêtements en cuir", soumis à la transformation et en jouissant de la chance de se déifier. Thanatos, comme mort consistant de l'existence éternelle loin de Dieu, signifie la perte de l'âme seulement quand l'homme n'est pas en communion avec le Créateur.

Mots-clés: Nekrotes et Thanatos, *nature humaine*, *vie religieuse*

From the perspective of the Bible and the patristic tradition, human nature is something else than for the empirical observation. Man was created *in the image and likeliness* of God, thus as a theological being who lives in a theocentric way, having in mind his preparation for *deification*. Thus, his essence consists in the way he was projected to relate to his Model and in his *becoming*, and not in the matter from which he was conceived. *Because for man, life resembling the divine nature is in accordance with his own nature*[1] (Saint Gregory of Nyssa). The Fall, however, meant the deviation of man from the road to God, his derail from his ontological aim. Man continues to live, but *against* nature, differently than according to the norms after which he was created; he came out of the original natural state. Even more, the historical reality of man evolves in the opposite way from that determined by the *image of God* in man. For science, only the state after the Fall represents the nature of man. It is necessary to make this distinction[2] because our whole endeavor regarding anthropology, the purpose of human life on earth and his death has a biblical-patristic vision.

The main difference between the man before the Fall and the man after the Fall is that he lost his coats of light which he replaced with „coats of skin" (Genesis 3, 21), *the image of God* being shadowed. The Holy Fathers develop an entire theory about the meaning of the „coats of skin" that God gave to men.

[1] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Comentarii la Ecleziast*, 1, P.G., 44, 624B.
[2] See Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit,* Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, p. 78–79.

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1. ***Nekrotes***

The casting out of Paradise is equivalent with *death*, because the immediate effect of sin[3] is death: „In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3, 19). „Unto Adam also and his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them". (Genesis 3, 21). In other words, Adam leaves for a while, he will degrade until he will return to what he was, dust. With this we come to a first conclusion, that the „coats of skin" do not represent the body (*soma*), but rather they are referring to the slow degradation of the body, not of the soul, which, it is true, is associated with evil by means of the body, but *nekroza* – degradation is not reached by the soul, because something that is not composed cannot be decomposed. Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks exactly about this meaning of the „coats of skin", as *nekrotes* – biological mortality: „God clothed men with the possibility of dying [...] and this precisely to cure our evil, so it wouldn't be eternal"[4]. Through disobedience, Adam brought evil in human nature, „this is the reason for which man decomposes, like a clay vase that returns into the ground, so that the evil within him would be cleaned and man would retrieve his original image through resurrection"[5]. Thus, this death – *nekrotes* – is not viewed, at least not by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, as a divine punishment, but rather as a blessing. Or, it can be considered a punishment, but with therapeutic and redeeming purpose. The biological period will prepare man for the return to God, which situates him in a intermediate state, „between perdition and redemption, between glorious life and death"[6]. (It is a true paradox, but the fascination of Christianity stands in the repeated shocks delivered to reason.)

Through its covering in „coats of skin", the body borrows something from the irrational nature which is specific to animals: „sexual union, conception, birth, pollution, the nipple, food, excretion, gradual growth to full stature, adult life, old age, sickness, death"[7]. Even more, it is about printing the whole human being – body and soul – with materiality, with the continuous flow of the elements that form the carnal, the material, the sensitive. So *nekroza* is degradation, a continuous change, the body living what we call today a biological, material life, and ends up dying, meaning that the soul leaves the body, the body becoming, again, dust:

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[3] Father Dumitru Stăniloae says that sin itself contains the punishment. Cronologically speaking, sin doesn't come after punishment, but man punishes himself by sinning, see note 98 at Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, la *Despre Rugăciunea Domnească*, în Scrieri. Partea I, EIBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1982, p. 445.

[4] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic,* VIII, Editura Heral, Bucureşti, 2006, p. 142. As well, Saint Methodius of Olympus says that God „made the coats of skin as if he would clothe man with *nekroza* (mortality)" (*Aglaofon sau despre Înviere* 1, 38, BEPES 18, p. 129, *apud* Panayotis Nellas, *op. cit.*, p. 80.)

[5] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *op. cit.*, VIII, p. 141.

[6] Cf. Basilio Petra, „La duplicita del mondo e della storia. La *tuniche di pelle* nell pensiero di P. Nellas", *Rivista di Ascetica e Mistica* 16, (1991), p. 96, apud Panayotis Nellas, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

[7] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre suflet şi înviere,* Editura Herald, Bucureşti, 2006, p. 65.

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„Because the senses are related to all that is coarse and earthly, and the rational nature si above the work of senses, this explains why man didn't succeed, only through senses, to choose good. Losing good, he obtained the habit of evil and this is why a part of us, that has become useless through the acceptance of evil, was destined to decay"[8]. The same eloquence has Vladimir Lossky, who understands through „coats of skin" „our present nature, our raw biological state, totally different from the transparent corporality from Paradise"[9].

It is interesting that these attributes of the „coats of skin" are not limited to the body. Saint Gregory of Nyssa identifies „the coats" with „the fleeting leaves of this material life" that have embraced the entire psychosomatic organism of man and that are portrayed by the „delights, glory and ephemeral honors and the fast killing plenitudes of the body", „pleasure and irascibility, the greed of the belly and the abstinence and all the like[10]. But, glory, honors, irascibility, abstinence are not features of the body, but a proof of the will and strength or the weakness of the soul, but they manifest themselves through the body. We understand from here that these two constitutive elements of the human being influence each other, they intertwine and follow one another, in a positive or negative way.

Saint John Chrysostom chooses the same way of interpretation when he comments Apostle Paul's words where he makes the distinction between *the natural body* (*sarx*) and *the spiritual body* (*pneuma*) („But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" – I *Corinthians* II, 14; „... for ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? I *Corinthians* III, 3; „That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" – *Ephesians* IV, 22): „As those with the wings of the Spirit *make the body spiritual*, so those who deviate and become slaves to their bellies and their lusts *would make the soul carnal*, not in the sense of its essence, but would corrupt its noble cause"[11]. Man transcends the created order, he is ontologically endowed with the power to become a saint, which means completely *in the image and likeliness of God*. Once he reaches this ideal it means that God is alive in his body, giving it His uncreated energy in such an efficient way that, even beyond death, this body or its relics make miracles (in that it violate the laws of physics). This doesn't cancel the physical death, but on the contrary it shows that

[8] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic,* VIII, p. 142.

[9] Vladimir Lossky, în studiul introductiv semnat de diac. Ioan I. Ică, *„Îndumnezeirea" omului, P. Nellas şi conflictul antropologiilor*, nota 64 în Panayotis Nellas, op. cit., p. 40.

[10] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre Rugăciunea Domnească*, Cuvântul V, în colecţia PSB, *Scrieri*, Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, vol. 29, pp. 443, 445.

[11] In *Romans* VIII, 8, Apostle Paul says: „so then they that are in the flesh cannot please God", which doesn't mean, according to Saint John Chrysostom's comment that flesh would reffer to „the body, or the nature of the body, but the carnal life and the world full of delight and madness, and which turns man into flesh (body)" – see Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Epistola către Romani* , Omilia a XII-a, Editura Christiana, Bucureşti, 2005, p. 228, 230.

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carrying to the end the process of decomposition is necessary to destroy the evil that man added to his nature. Thus, nekroza has a providential purpose, the purpose of separating good from evil. Anyway, physical death is the one that establishes the deification of man.

2. *Thanatos*

So *nekrotes* (biological mortality) is neither the body, as we saw, nor death as the separation between body and soul and neither *thanatos* – the death of the soul. Saint Gregory of Nyssa shades the difference between these two terms – *nekrotes* and *thanatos* – both translated into Romanian through *death:* „Just as death (*nekrotes*) of the body means the departure of life from the sensitive elements, for the soul, death (*thanatos*) means drifting apart from the real life[12]. In the succession of the born ones entered mortality (*nekrotes*). This is why we have been transmitted a dead life (*nekros bios),* death itself killing us in some way (...). Through death (*nekroza*) is killed not the man, but *the corruption that envelops him*. Death destroys the prison of life in corruption, and man, abandoning corruption together with death and with what he received from it, is set free (...). Through death (*nekroza*) the soul arises from death (*thanatos*). Because if it doesn't die, it remains forever dead and *unwelcoming* of life, and dying it comes to life, abandoning its inclination towards death"[13]. This is how the Pascal hymn lyrics are explained: *Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death*. Or, the Savior's advice „Leave the dead burry their dead". Though alive, those were considered dead, because they were far from God, the One who gives life. Because the real spiritual life is possible only through the living presence of the Holy Spirit in man, gained through the active participation at the Church Sacraments. „The true life of the soul is developed through the participation to good"[14] and to God[15]. Living in Christ makes the man alive, otherwise he is dead while living.

One of the constitutive elements of the human being is freedom. Man alone can decide which direction to take. Regardless of the way he acts, God doesn't cease for a moment to advance His offer of love, to which man can answer or not. Being the fruit of communion of the Trinitarian Persons, man holds within himself the seal of Trinitarian love and the quality of the being that was created from the harmonious joining of elements that belong to two natures: created and divine. What differentiates the creation from the Creator is transformation. The dynamism of the nature of human being allows the cultivation of virtues, which bring man closer to God and make him like Him. Through freedom and dynamism, man can

[12] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic,* VIII, p. 143.

[13] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Tâlcuire la Cântarea Cântărilor,* Omilia a XII-a, în *Scrieri,* col. PSB, vol. 29,
EIBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1982, p. 272.

[14] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Despre pruncii morţi prematur, către Hierios,* în *Scrieri,* Partea a doua, PSB, EIBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1998, p. 417.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 418.

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continuously grow in the direction of good, until he reaches deification or he can drift apart from God through increasing familiarity with evil. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who has his own view regarding this aspect, „the familiarity with evil necessarily implies drifting apart from good, while drifting apart from evil brings forward the communion with God”[16]. Sin – understood as option (and consequence) for a life lived in the area of evil – is the cause of death (*thanatos*). This is why, in a couple of lines, we will insist upon the problem of evil in order to better approach the understanding of *thanatos*.

3. The problem of evil

God is a personal and almighty reality. He is alive, He exists. As an element that opposes the Creator, evil, according to Gregory of Nyssa, doesn't exist as essence, as substance, but only in a moral sense, as a state of a human being who has drifted apart from the source of good. Apparently, we are talking about two extremes. But evil opposes Good not as a reality contrary to Good, but as an absence of Good. Or, even more clearly said, evil doesn't oppose Good, but it is present when Good is absent. Where there is no Good, exactly through this absence the perception of evil is possible, which is not a substance in itself, but it is connected to an existence from which Good is totally or partially absent. „Evil can be seen in the absence of Good like a shadow that appears once the sun disappears”[17].

God is Good. Around him gravitate, through communion, the ones who do good. When virtue ceases, man drifts apart from God and feels the absence of love like an evil. Given the fact that God is immanent, the Bishop of Nyssa doesn't let us understand that he talks about a physical absence of the Creator, but about an absence in a moral, energetic sense, of which man is to blame, because he wishes to follow his will that drives him in a different direction, away from Good. God is not present „where the creature refuses His presence or wants to free itself from the action of His presence, where the creature can refuse the communion with the Creator, namely at the level of personal beings: men and angels”[18]. Once the communion between man and God ceases, different evil feelings are born. This is what happened – according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa – with the angels, who, because they stopped practicing virtue, created the context for *envy*. That is, they fell from love, they closed themselves towards the presence of God and refused good. „Thus they come to bear evil”[19]. Evil, therefore, has its origin in the interior

[16] Pr. Vasile Răducă, *Antropologia Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa,* Editura IBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1995, p. 171.

[17] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic,* VI, p. 135*:* „Just as darkness follows the removal of light and disappears in its presence, so, as long as goodness is present in a nature, evil is something nonexistent”.

[18] Pr. Vasile Răducă, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

[19] Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 135.

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movements, in the personal functions of the angel that refuses the communion with Good.

We are speaking now of an angel that bears evil. Not an evil substance, but a feeling that has become evil. Evil is „hypostatized in a personal reality, good at its origin, but *distorted* by sin". The perversion of the faculties of the being that ceases to participate to good, turns that being into a source of evil. „Without having consistency in itself and through itself, evil finds its power in the soul that removed the presence of God, thus perverting the natural way of action of its faculties. Thus, evil appears by removing good and drifting apart from good. It is not a simple absence, but the absence of what should have been present"[20].

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the devil „invented" evil in the created world, „he became the father of lies and the enemy of all who have as purpose of freedom the tendency towards good". But if in the case of the devils the fall was a consequence of envy, it was a conscious rebellion against God, for man it is an engagement that is foreign to his nature. The Fall that followed the casting out of Paradise created the context of such an obvious familiarity with evil, that this became something *inherent to human nature*, man often losing the awareness of what he used to be[21].

Once the sin was committed, which means drifting apart from God, man enters the area of evil. This is the beginning of death in man. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, death – *thanatos,* hell, would be precisely this drifting apart from God and lack of any meaning of existence, state which begins during life and can continue even after the death of the body, if man doesn't give up the wrong choices beforehand. On an exterior wall of Sucevița Monastery are represented some stairs on which the souls ascend and are welcomed, at the end, by Jesus himself, bent with his arms wide open, ready to save and pull towards Him all those who are worthy through virtue to be in communion with God. At the right of the stairs are the angels, and at the left, the demons. At each stair, associated with different passions and trials, some souls fall, others continue their spiritual ascent. The Fall is a consequence of man's choice. Thus, the choice of evil seems to be a way through which man accepts to stay away from God, that is to go into hell. This is why, says Saint Irineus, hell is the constant decision of sinners to choose misdeeds[22]. „This fall into the dark abyss, which corresponds to a passion, begins with life on earth, - says Father Stăniloae – like a fall in the dark loneliness of lack of communion with Christ from Whose love radiates light. Falling into the sterile hole of selfishness, from where no light radiates and no one can escape, because not even through his weakened will, accustomed to the illusion that freedom is in this self-existence,

[20] Pr. Vasile Răducă, *op. cit.*, p. 175

[21] *Ibidem,* p. 176.

[22] Dr. Antonie Plămădeală, *Despre Rai şi Iad*, Sibiu, 1995 *apud* Sf. Irineu, *Contra Haeres*., lib. V, cap. XXVII, I, P. L. 1196.

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doesn't want to come out"[23]. It is about the freedom that man has and doesn't know how to use, thus becoming his own enemy. Nikolai Berdiaev understands that, this way, man becomes his own judge, that he can condemn himself to hell, if this is his choice. Therefore, Berdiaev says, „what frightens me is not what God could do to me, but what I, myself, could"[24], a statement that doesn't contradict in the least the Apostle's words regarding the freedom God offers to man: „And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient" (Romani I, 28).

4. The consistency of hell

No matter how hell was seen by the Holy Fathers or by theologians, the information from the Gospel text was not excluded, which says that in hell will be fire, mourning and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25, 41; Luke 16, 24). It has been tried to be determined if these are only figurative expressions of some spiritual sufferings or if they have to be taken *ad literam*, as physical torture. We will only stop at some less plastic views about hell, which are inclined towards the soul that refused God's offer of love, opting for evil.

Thus, Saint John of Damascus understands the fire of hell as a portrayal of sufferings provoked by the incapacity of continuing to satisfy one's desires: „Those who have obtained unchanging in passion don't desire God, but sin. But there the real commission of evil and sin doesn't take place. Because we don't eat, drink, clothe, marry, we don't gather wealth, jealousy or any kind of evil doesn't satisfy us. Thus, desiring and not communing of everything that belongs to lust, are burnt by desires as of fire"[25]. Man continues to wish for what he has cultivated in life, good or evil. In the existence beyond the death of the body, the virtuous souls will fully enjoy the communion with God, and the sinful one, will wish to commune from the substance of his passion, but he won't be able to. This torment is the substance of hell, according to Saint John of Damascus. But because God created man with the longing for Him, we could believe that another reason of pain is the inability to be in communion with God. „Hell is a double evil, says Father Stăniloae, the desire to commit sin and the inability to commit it"[26].

The natural behavior of man is the one that always heads towards God. It is a way of reintegrating in the state that was lost by the sin of our Forefathers. „If we don't accustom our eyes, ears and tongue to see, hear, speak by nature, as a result we will have darkness and the heaviest of silences"[27]. Communion means dialogue. In its absence, man obtains silence. Thus, hell has another hideous face, which

[23] Preot prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă,* Editura Institututlui Biblic şi de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucureşti, 1997, vol. III, p. 175.

[24] Nikolai Berdiaev, *De la destination de l homme. Essai d ethique paradoxale,* Paris, 1935, p. 356.

[25] Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dialog contra maniheilor*, P. G. 94, 1573.

[26] Preot prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

[27] Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul apud Preot prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, idem, p. 178.

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consists in everyone closing themselves towards you, in everyone's silence, in dark loneliness.

God doesn't impose his presence by force. He offers love to everyone, and the people who open their hearts, feel this love. The one who defends his autonomy becomes stubborn in his refusal to accept that his existence depends on this love. His stubbornness grows as pride doesn't let him admit that someone can love him when he, himself, can't. „He could admit the reality of someone who would depend on him, but not someone who discovers himself as being the one who depends through his endless love"[28]. Thus, for Saint Isaac the Syrian hell appears as a punishment of love.

The suffering of the one who is in hell seems to always be connected to love. Saint Symeon the New Theologian sees fire as a new way of feeling the divine light. The one who is not ready to stay around God will be burnt by the divine light, which warms the right ones and fills them with God's love. Ioannis Roamnides is also in agreement, considering that God's light can't be borne by sinners, for them becoming a burning fire. The saints, instead, got familiar to the light and warmth of God since their life inside their human bodies, and they feel good, because they find their peace and identity in communion with the Creator.

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[28] Preot prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, idem., p. 179.

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