Accepted Panel proposal for the Conference
“Thinking about Nothing: Negation, Philosophy and the Mystical”
(Hope University, Liverpool, 2-5 July 2020, postponed for summer 2021)

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Title of the panel:
God and Negation. From Philo of Alexandria to John Chrysostom.

Participants and Papers:
1. Beatrice Wyss (Bern)
   Philo of Alexandria: The nothingness of the human being, God’s unknowability, and mystical experience
2. Ilya Kaplan (Bern)
   Words and Images: Approaching the Divine with Gregory of Nyssa
3. Georgiana Huian (Bern)

Proposal:
1. Motivation:
The participants are members in a research project which investigates both the role of negativity in theology and anthropology and the connections between negative theology and negative anthropology. The project is pursued at the Faculty of Theology, University of Bern with the financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation from 2019 to 2022, and it is entitled: “The Human Being as Image of God and Abyss of Desires. Theological implications of anthropological conceptualization in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and pagan-religious Platonism”. As our research focuses on the use of negative language regarding God (as unknowable) and the human being as image of the unknowable God, we consider that the Liverpool conference will be an extremely favorable environment to present the results of our investigations on “unsaying” and “unknowing” God and the human. Our panel brings an inspiring contribution by reflecting on the relevance of ancient authors (1st century BC – 5th century AD) for contemporary thought about “nothingness” and the “mystical”.

2. Panel Description:
The ancient authors knew: in approaching God, language and knowledge reach their limits and see their own nothingness. Before God’s essence, the human being faces pure nothingness: there is no word, no image, no thought to grasp it. Yet the knowledge of the Divine attracts the human being with an irresistible force, as the most pure longing that raises the human above its own nothingness. Within this longing, the human being becomes a craftsman of negativity in order to speak about the divine and its experience of the divine. Exploring the fine interweaving of negativity and the mystical in Philo of
Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, this panel offers an overview on the strategies of negation linked with metaphorical language in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity. This exploration brings a wave of “ancient freshness” in our contemporary approach of the “unknowable” and “unspeakable”. It also fuels today’s reflections on fullness and nothingness of language or reason: is there anything more reasonable than to step into the mystical, after language and thinking have exhausted all their possibilities of reaching God?

3. Proposed Papers: Participants, Titles and Abstracts

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Philo of Alexandria: The nothingness of the human being, God’s unknowability, and mystical experience
Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE – 50 CE) was an important Jewish thinker, a near contemporary of Paulus and Seneca (both ca. 1 – 65 CE). At the time when Jesus was active in Palestine, Philo presented in Alexandria in Egypt a highly developed negative theology, based on scripture (e.g. Num. 23:19). It is my aim to present Philo’s negative theology to a broader public, and to show how God’s unknowability is intimately connected with Philo’s concept of the human being as “nothing” and mystical experience as the only reasonable way for human “nothingness” to come into contact with the divine.

God’s essence is, according to Philo, unknowable. This unknowability God shares with human mind, who is also unknowable. Creation too, is in its essence unknowable, because it changes continually. Unknowability though is an important concept in Philo’s thinking; of course, unknowability is not a synonym for nothing. Nothingness characterises the human being (in Greek oudeneia); as a “nothing” the human is not able to know God because neither human senses nor mind are able to “grasp” God, the Greek term is akataleptos (what cannot be grasped, reached or touched; incomprehensible). It stems from discussions about epistemology between Plato’ school and the Stoics. Philo is fully aware of the epistemological background. In designating God’s essence as akataleptos, he makes it clear that human beings will never know anything about God’s essence. Having closed the approach to God via mind and senses, there is a need to come into contact with the divine otherwise. This “third way” is mystical experience. Philo characterizes this experience as mind that goes out of the soul, to meet not God’s essence, but God’s powers or God’s Word. In Philo’s thinking, God is surrounded by divine powers, his Word and his Wisdom. For human beings it is only possible to meet God’s powers or Word, and never God’s essence. This contact is called by Philo extasis (movement outwards) or sober drunkenness.
Words and Images: Approaching the Divine with Gregory of Nyssa

The paper presents a theological reflection on the theme of the divine nothingness and, for this purpose, engages with the thought of an original and challenging Christian writer, Gregory of Nyssa († c. 394). The Nyssen’s vision of language presupposes that our words, which are a human invention, cannot have God’s essence as their referent. The unspeakable divine essence simply does not exist for language since the very term “divine essence” has as its referent a mere human concept. Moreover, one can claim that the divine essence does not exist for human beings at all because they can never transcend their language. Thus, for the created mind, the uncreated essence is nothing but nothingness. However, there is a word in God himself: his only begotten Son, the Word of God, who has condescended to be incarnate both in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, as Origen, Gregory’s “teacher,” expressed it. But the crucial question here is how this Christological core of theology can be understood against Gregory’s philosophy of language. What is the referent of this unique and nonverbal Word? What relevance does all of this have for us as humans trapped in our language?

One of the possible approaches to such questions is to look at them in light of the concept of the image of God because, for Gregory, God’s Word became God’s image in the incarnation. Therefore, one can argue that Christ (as the signifier of the Father and as an “atextual” and sensual image) redeems us from the captivity of language so that the “nothingness” of God’s essence can acquire a new meaning or even be experienced through Christ. But what makes everything even more complicated is Gregory’s idea that the resurrected Christ lacks any creaturely qualities: Christ’s humanity is simply totally transformed into his divinity. If the human Christ has thus become pure nothingness, what remains as the ground of mystical experience consisting in going beyond language? Probably, Church is an answer: a eucharistic community in which the very Word of God becomes incarnate in images, gestures, silence, food.

Layers of Negativity in Thinking and Talking about God:
Exploring John Chrysostom’s Language of Negation

In his First Homily on the Incomprehensibility of God, John Chrysostom (†407) addresses two important questions: (1) what can we know about God in this life? and (2) can we grasp in knowledge the essence (ousia) of God? He follows these questions with the intention to refute the presupposition that the human being, in its earthly condition, can fully and perfectly know God.

In order to argue for the unknowability of the “essence” of God, Chrysostom mobilizes a whole range of a fortiori arguments having a similar structure: if the manifestations or actions of God are not comprehensible for us, than his essence must be even more hidden and incomprehensible. John Chrysostom fills this structure with biblical references, images and analogies. Moreover, he develops a
refined negative language in order to characterize the inaccessibility of God’s manifestations for human thought, knowledge and speech. This paper explores the uses of negative terms constructed with *alpha privativum* and rendering attributes such as “incomprehensible”; “inaccessible”; “inscrutable”, “unsearchable”; “indescribable” or “ineffable”. The central term of this list is “incomprehensible” (*akataleptos*), which becomes an overarching concept for the unknowability of God. The paper also analyses the nuances and differences between these negative terms while looking at how they are attributed to different manifestations of God in his wisdom, judgements, rewards, ways, gifts and glory. It therefore expounds on Chrysostom’s construction of different layers of negation in order to preserve untouchable one last negativity: the impossibility to grasp the essence of God. A special focus will be given, in the end, to the possibility to have a mystical experience of God, which assumes all these levels of negation and transcends them.