



Theological Hermeneutics and Discourse About God as Seen by Juan José Tamayo-Acosta

DARIUSZ GARDOCKI 

The Catholic Academy in Warsaw–Collegium Bobolanum, dariusz.gardocki@akw.edu.pl

Abstract: One of the important tasks and at the same time challenges facing theology of all times is how to speak about God in an understandable way. This is due to the fact that God is an incomprehensible mystery that exceeds human cognitive abilities. As well as with the multiplicity of existing concepts and images of God not only in different religions, but also often within the same religion. The task of theology is to help us understand both how God reveals himself to us and what he communicates to us about himself in his word, especially in the person of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this article is to show how God can and should be spoken of in theology today according to Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo-Acosta. The first point presents theological hermeneutics as an essential tool in rethinking in a new way God's self-revelation in history, as well as in understanding dogmas. The second point discusses the need to include language in discourse about God, which refers to symbols and metaphors as means that express meaning better than concepts alone the mystery of God. In the third point, Christian mysticism is shown as an example of a metaphorical way of talking about God.

Keywords: theological hermeneutics, God, Mystery, metaphorical theology, Christian mysticism

The proper subject and focus of theology is God. He is at the same time the main subject of theology, because He speaks to man in Scripture, which is the word of God. Therefore, “only Scripture is <theology> in the fullest sense of the word, because its real subject is God.”¹ (Ratzinger 1982, 337)² In order for God's speech to be heard and understood by man, God uses the human word. For this purpose He chooses people, biblical authors, through whom He Himself speaks and history, making it the place of His self-revelation and encounter with man. The fact that God enters history and reveals Himself in it—which is accomplished most fully in Jesus Christ, since He is the incarnate Son of God—does not mean that God loses something of His divinity and incomprehensibility, and ceases to be a Mystery to man.

Therefore, one of the important tasks facing theology today is to make an effort to clarify that this Mystery, which is God, is not at all “irrational, but is a superabundance of meanings made available to reason so that it can set out to find what is always beyond and above what is attainable, verifiable and definable.” (Staglianò 2023, 68)

¹ All translations are the author's own.

² God is, as writes Adolphe Gesché, “essentially His own theologian, *noesis noeseos*, the thought of thought, the theologian of the Thought that He is.” (2001, 33–34)

It is also to show that the Mystery is a “paradox,” which does not mean that it exempts from or suspends or even excludes thinking, but only that the Mystery is that which precedes, sustains and at the same time transcends human thinking and the associated understanding of reality (cf. González de Cardedal 2006, 959). The task of theology, therefore, is to help us understand both the way God reveals and manifests Himself to us, and what He communicates to us about Himself in His word. Always being aware that the better we understand God’s self-revelation, the more obvious it becomes to us how much still remains hidden from us (cf. Wierciński 2021, 187).

One of the signs of the times that characterizes modernity and shapes human experience today is multiculturalism and the associated religious pluralism. This presents theology with a challenge and at the same time an incentive to seek and find “new signs, new symbols, new ways of communicating the Word, new forms of beauty emerging in different cultural circles, including unconventional forms of beauty that may be of little interest to evangelizers, but have become particularly attractive to other people.” (Francis 2013) It also challenges and encourages the search for appropriate language and ways of speaking and presenting God today.

One theologian who has taken on this task is Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo-Acosta.³ He has included his proposal in a book entitled *Nuevo paradigma teológico*. Its goal is to present a new theological paradigm that, on the one hand, could serve as a bridge and meeting place between the theology developed by theologians coming from the so-called First and Third World. On the other hand, it would take into account the different contexts and sensitivities and the type of hermeneutics these theologies refer to in their reflection. In this paradigm, the question of discourse about God occupies an important place. Therefore, what will interest us in this article is first and foremost the search for an answer to the question of how one can and should talk about God, according to Tamayo-Acosta, in theology today. Indeed, this question is an important part of the new theological paradigm he proposes. Moreover, it touches the very essence and purpose of theology, which is that theology wants to be man’s study of God (cf. Dufour 1970, xv). A systematic reflection that seeks to know and understand God and what He has revealed about Himself both in His word and, above all, in the person of Jesus Christ.

³ Juan José Tamayo-Acosta (born 1946) is a Spanish theologian. He holds a doctorate in theology, philosophy and literature. He is a full professor at the Charles III University in Madrid, where he heads the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Theology and Religious Studies. Co-founder and secretary general of the John XXIII Association of Theologians. He is a member of the Spanish Society for Religious Studies, the International Committee of the World Forum for Theology and Liberation, and the Board of Directors of the Ibn Arabi Forum. He teaches theology at universities in Spain, South America and North America. He contributes to numerous Spanish and international journals in philosophy, theology, social sciences and religious studies. He is the author of more than fifty books, among which we can mention the six-volume work *Hacia la comunidad* (1998–2005), *Fundamentalismos y dialogo entre religions* (2009), *Iglesia y sociedad en España* (2005). The book he wrote entitled *Islam: Cultura, religión y política* (2009) was awarded the World Prize of the President of the Republic of Tunisia in Islamic Studies.

The first point of the article will present the validity and importance of theological hermeneutics as an essential tool in rethinking in a new way the self-revelation of God in history, as well as in understanding dogmas. The second point will address the need to include in discourse about God a language that appeals to symbols and metaphors as means that express the mystery of God and His divine nature better than concepts alone. An example of this type of speaking about God is Christian mysticism. The discussion of this issue is devoted to the last section of this article. In the summary, we present the conclusions that result from our analysis of Tamayo-Acosta's proposed way of presenting and talking about God in theology today.

1. Hermeneutic Horizon of Theology

Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting literary texts. It is defined in a general sense as the ability to interpret literary texts and historical sources, and in a broader sense, also any symbolic content. Its goal is to help discover the meanings hidden in the texts, symbols and works of art being interpreted, as well as to communicate those meanings (cf. Bronk 1993, 770–774). At the core of hermeneutics is the belief in the unity of reality and that man, as a thinking being, seeks to understand the world and himself, and that he captures this understanding in interpretation through the symbols of a culture, as well as by referring to the testimonies of history that have been passed down through tradition (cf. International Theological Commission 1989, A.I/1). Hermeneutics is also used in theology, especially in biblical studies, to understand and interpret and assimilate what God says to people. Scripture itself is nothing but an interpretation of God's revelation of Himself in history. The same is true of theology, which is an actualizing interpretation of God's word and a creative interpretation of the Christian message. Theological hermeneutics is therefore inseparable from the interpretation of the word of God and human existence (cf. Geffré 1984, 39; Tamayo-Acosta 2000, 71–73).

It is needed due to the fact that God speaks to man using human language. Hence comes the need to find an appropriate hermeneutic, i.e., one that is helpful in understanding and interpreting, as well as in rethinking in a new way God's self-revelation in all its richness in human history. This understanding, however, must not be limited to the interpretation of the past alone, but must also be open to reading this past in light of the demands of the present day and current human experience. Thanks to this opening, it becomes possible to discover what is new, unexpected and unpredictable in the word of God, as well as to overcome all kinds of religious fundamentalism, one of the characteristics of which is the abandonment of hermeneutics as an important mediation between the foundational texts of a religion and the cultural context in which they are read (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2009, 181–85). Without the mediation

offered by hermeneutics, theological discourse is limited to repeating texts from the past and uncritically submits to the pronouncements of the magisterium, which then become the only hermeneutical principle. This is why hermeneutics, as Tamayo-Acosta (2004, 65–66) rightly points out, is the best answer to the fundamentalism present in religions, because it is something fundamental to any theology.⁴ It also provides assistance “in seeing the subjective and objective element in one reality of faith in parallel.” (Krupka 2020, 151)

Therefore, we can say that the importance and value of hermeneutic mediation in theological discourse lies in the fact that it makes possible to overcome the distance that exists between the source texts that speak about God and our lives. It also allows us to recognize in history the voice of God speaking to us (cf. Pontificia Commissione Biblica 1993, 68). In a word, hermeneutics helps theology, which by its very nature is “an infinite movement of interpretation in which the novelty of the questions asked of the text entails the risk of unpredictable answers,” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 78) to discover ever new possibilities for understanding the word of God today.⁵ This understanding is always an interpretation, which, because it is a human understanding of the word of God, must always be regarded as provisional and temporary. Therefore, it is open to new understandings and further interpretations based on emerging new questions and new challenges to which answers need to be sought in God’s revelation as conveyed through Scripture.

Hence, the mission of theology, understood as hermeneutical writing, is, according to Tamayo-Acosta, “to create new interpretations of Christianity and promote meaningful Christian practices according to the specific situation, time and place.” (2004, 78) This understanding of theology entails, according to the Spanish theologian, a significant change in the understanding of truth itself, for henceforth truth is no longer seen as “*adaequatio intellectus cum re*, but as that which is constantly happening, and subject to development.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 78) It also has an impact on the understanding of the interpretation of biblical texts, since it is seen as a continuous process that leads to new interpretations due to the changes that are constantly taking place in our reality both individually and socially (cf. Segundo 1975, 12).

Speaking of theological hermeneutics, Tamayo-Acosta finally draws attention to the need to create and use today a hermeneutic of solidarity, which is an important corrective to existential theological interpretation, because unlike the latter, which is individualistic in nature, a hermeneutic of solidarity values the communitarian and ethical dimensions of faith. It is based “on dialogue, interaction, intersubjectivity and on horizontal communicative action.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 79; cf. also

⁴ Hermeneutics also protects theology itself from the danger of fundamentalism, which would consist in “equating the word of God and Scripture, truth and formulation historically located.” (Wiling 1983, 317–18)

⁵ The encounter with the Gospel itself, at least at some stage, contributes to the loss of the obvious, since it often shocks and leads to the shattering of old, established patterns (cf. Werbick 2010, 179–82).

Tamayo-Acosta 2000, 80–82) It also takes into account, on the one hand, the fact that man does not remain at the level of what is found, but seeks always to improve, which makes it possible for there to be interaction between sacred texts and the actual lives of men and women. On the other hand, this type of hermeneutics values and takes into account the lives of marginalized groups. The aforementioned dialogue and interaction that takes place between Scripture and life leads, according to the Spanish theologian, “to the discovery of the historical and therefore adventurous character of Scripture,” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 79) which points to the need for constant re-interpretation, i.e. moving in a hermeneutical circle that presupposes the process of understanding itself. This process has a circular structure, because as such, it is a dynamic happening between questions and answers. This makes it possible to better understand the text and, based on it, to correct old answers. The process of understanding also has a circular structure because it requires relating parts of a given text to the whole. In the light of what has been said, we see that theological hermeneutics presupposes, according to the Spanish theologian, a permanent interpretation. It also avoids any possible ideologization, which can take place when the authority of texts considered sacred is attempted to be uncritically imposed on other people in order to have authority over them and their lives.

Therefore, according to Tamayo-Acosta, theological hermeneutics should adopt, although not uncritically, the perspective of the hermeneutic model of critical theory applied to tradition. This is because it helps “to free ourselves from the authoritarian impositions of tradition, which once subordinated Christianity to an anachronistic conception of faith and theology to a hermeneutical model devoid of creative imagination.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 74) At the same time, the Spanish theologian adds that “critique of certain religious-theological traditions and of tradition itself does not at all mean breaking with tradition, since it is a constitutive element of Christianity and religion. Nor does it require abandoning memory, which is the inner moment of Christian critical cognition.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 74)

An example of such a hermeneutic, according to the Spanish theologian, is feminist hermeneutics, which uses a hermeneutic of suspicion. This is because this type of hermeneutics makes one think about all kinds of assumptions and conditions that may have influenced both the creation of texts and their current understanding and interpretation. It also reveals the danger that always exists, which concerns the possibility of subordinating the interpretation of revealed texts to the interests of specific individuals or social groups. In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion does not allow the interpretation of revealed texts to serve anyone’s interests or any ideology. Finally, it realizes that certain religious theories or doctrines can also be used to belittle other religious concepts and sensibilities, or even to attack them (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 81).

Understanding theology as hermeneutics ultimately contributed, according to Tamayo-Acosta, to the discovery of a new approach to the relationship that exists

between Scripture and the Church's dogmas. Specifically, it made it possible to see that between Scripture and dogmas there is a relationship of complementarity, not sameness, since dogmas are, first, human pronouncements on the word of God. Second, they refer to that which is beyond grasp and goes beyond the formulations through which the intangible is expressed. Third, they have a dimension that announces and anticipates the future without closing history (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2011, 325–26). Therefore, one should avoid equating dogmas with the word of God. This is because they are ecclesial formulations by means of which is expressed in a solemn way what is commonly believed. For this reason, dogmas are “partly dependent on the expressive specificity of the language used in a certain era and under certain circumstances.” (International Theological Commission 1989, B.II/2) Therefore, in order to be able to understand dogma, one needs to accept the limits and constraints of our understanding, because dogma ultimately refers to a mystery that cannot be grasped objectively and that transcends the formulations in which it is expressed. It is therefore necessary to see and interpret dogma in its historical location in order to distinguish between the truth it seeks to convey to us and which can no longer be dispensed with, and the specific formulations and concepts by which this truth has been expressed and which are typical of a particular era and time.

Therefore, dogmas are statements that are subject to certain conditions, such as language, the horizon of view, the situation, the accepted models of interpretation and understanding, and the philosophical categories through which the truths of faith are thought and expressed. However, this does not at all imply a relativization that would allow the rejection of dogmas. The important issue, therefore, is to “preserve” dogma, while at the same time showing its openness to living Tradition and its impact on the present and people's lives here and now. The aforementioned “preservation” of dogma also takes place when it is transferred to other planes and subjected to new interpretations in order to rediscover its meaning for a given era. Thus, it is not a matter of overcoming or rejecting Tradition, but of embracing it in a creative way, which is an expression of understanding and appreciation of Tradition. In this sense, hermeneutics can contribute to the renewal of theology, since it “urges one to return to the original thinking about God's relationship with His people, and thus to the constant effort of thinking about the beginning anew.” (Wierciński 2021, 204) Thus, it urges the search for the most adequate language in discourse about God and in presenting Him. For language is the tool and means of expression through which the truth that is discovered is described. At the same time, this truth always exceeds what language tries to describe and express (cf. Krupka 2020, 154).

2. The Symbolic and Metaphorical Nature of Talking About God

One of the most important challenges facing theology today, according to Tamayo-Acosta, is the multiculturalism of modern societies, which implies cultural and worldview pluralism, including religious pluralism, which often leads to the fragmentation of truth. Such a challenge is also what the Spanish theologian refers to as intellectual uncertainty, which characterizes modernity and promotes questioning of what was previously considered the truth and constituted a certain point of support. All this also has its impact on the understanding of theology, as it does not allow it to be conceived as an indivisible whole and a closed system that has definitive answers and thus possesses the truth that it wants to impose on others in an authoritarian manner. It also shows that it is difficult to create theology today based on what has been considered unquestionable and definitive until now, and this puts it in the position of a defenseless David. At the same time, it requires those who practice theology to be able to recognize with humility that they do not have ready answers to all questions (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 15–16). Therefore, theology created today, must be questioning and creative. Seeking, and at the same time suspicious of itself, and open to permanent self-criticism. For theology cannot, as Karl Barth (cf. 1965, 152–53), quoted by our Author, stated, be content with what it has already achieved, but must constantly start from the beginning and from scratch, lest it fall into routine and automatism. She should also seek answers to the question of what is the most appropriate way to talk about God today, and pay attention to images that represent God.

What can help accomplish this task, among other things, according to the Spanish theologian, is “awakening the symbolic imagination.” Specifically, it is a matter of valuing and restoring the proper place and meaning of symbols, which has already been initiated in modern philosophy.⁶ Indeed, today’s world seems to be oriented “toward a new era of symbolism, in which symbols gain anew aesthetic and ontological primacy.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 164) This is also perceptible in many religions, including Christianity, especially in a popular religiosity, where symbols and images play an important role. The aforementioned awakening of the symbolic imagination should also take place in theology, since it is, as Karl Rahner (cf. 2002, 278) stated, essentially a theology of the symbol, the best example of which is the theology of the Logos. Moreover, the symbol of God is the basic symbol of any religious system and the essential point of reference for believers in their understanding of the world and life. In turn, the language about God, which is in reality a symbolic language, is what shapes the identity of believers and influences their lives and conduct.

Therefore, according to Tamayo-Acosta, what is needed in theology today is a return to the best tradition of symbolic theology, one of the main representatives of

⁶ An example of this is the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (cf. 1970, 254–64), in which symbolic thinking has an important place.

which is Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagite. He distinguishes two ways of knowing God: symbolic and philosophical. The former has the character of initiation, while the latter has the character of proving. However, they should not be contrasted with each other. What's more, the symbolic way should be regarded as an equal and important tool in arriving at the mystery of God. It is also necessary, in speaking of God, to refer, according to Dionysius, to the model of analogy, which presupposes a great similarity on the one hand, and an even greater dissimilarity on the other. This model ultimately points to the need to undergo a process of purification of the symbols applied to God, so that it becomes possible to discover the transcendent dimension of divinity, which surpasses the materiality of the symbols we use in representing God. The key of symbolic theology is the symbolism of dissimilarity, which finds its point of support in Scripture, where God is presented as completely Other and without any comparison with any earthly reality, including man.

The importance of a symbol lies in the fact that, first, it reveals certain aspects of reality that are inaccessible to other kinds of cognition. Second, the symbol is a kind of bridge connecting the literal meaning with what it refers to and points to. This is because there is an intrinsic connection between the symbol and the object that is evoked through the symbol. Third, the symbol "makes the absence present and actualizes something that cannot be reached. It cannot be perceived and is unknown." (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 170) Therefore, the symbol is, on the one hand, an epiphany of mystery and a manifestation of the unspeakable. On the other hand, it is what covers this mystery, thus protecting and emphasizing its transcendent nature. Fourth, the symbol has a utopian-anticipatory function, since it directs the gaze toward the ideal future toward which all of humanity is moving, i.e., free from all oppression and that which does not allow man to be fully himself. Fifth, the symbol has a communal character, since it is not the product of an individual, but is born in the community and in it acquires meaning. At the same time, it invites man to engage with his whole self and to undertake a journey together with others in learning about and opening up to the unspeakable, yet present in the form of a mystery that exceeds and expands man's cognitive capacity. Therefore, reason should not seek to eliminate the symbol, because the symbol does not fight reason at all. On the contrary, it helps restore the proper balance between the order of reason and the order of emotions. It values man's suggestive and imaginative abilities, showing that human cognition is not limited to purely theoretical cognition (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 164–71).

Hence, one of the tasks and at the same time challenges facing theology today, according to Tamayo-Acosta, is to take into account what metaphorical theology proposes, which is a relatively new paradigm and an original theological project that represents a corrective to the purely conceptual approach. For metaphorical theology draws attention to the inadequacy of human language about God. Therefore, it takes as its main premise that all theological discourse about God should be metaphorical. It also values the role of imagination as that factor responsible for the creation of new

images and ideas in theology, and thus opens theology to new perspectives. Finally, metaphorical theology is a pluralistic theology, since it believes that only a multiplicity of images is able to approximate and express the richness of religious experience. “The language of religious experience is the language of images.” (Zink 2001, 29) This statement also applies to the images of God functioning in various religions, which, according to the type of theology under discussion, should be treated exclusively as partial for the reason that they are unable to exhaust the mystery of God. Finally, metaphorical theology points out that theology is only one form of reflecting and speaking about God (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 15–16).

Adopting the discussed assumptions of metaphorical theology, leads the Spanish theologian to formulate the following conclusions about God and the discourse about Him. First, that the God of Revelation is a hidden God. Second, that in talking about God today, there is a need to return anew to biblical concepts such as Wisdom, Spirit and Word, since they express and emphasize the mystery of the Divine nature, the understanding of which exceeds the capacity of human reason. They also point to the inner dynamism that is present in God. Third, those images of God that have to do with authority, submission and dependence and are the result of a patriarchal interpretation of Scripture should be eliminated. Instead, it is necessary to value those images of God that fit into and refer to the best mystical tradition, which says nothing about submission to the whole, but only oneness with the whole. Such images may include those related to nature, such as: “Source of All Goods,” “Light,” “Invigorating Wind,” or “Water of Life.” Also those images that refer to love and point to God as Love, Bridegroom and Friend, which finds its point of support in Scripture, especially in the prophetic and wisdom writings. Another image of God that should be taken into account in theological reflection today is to see the world as “the body of God,” and thus as a place of encounter with God, as metaphorical theology proposes. This is because this image is closely related to the creation of the world and points to a God who, although transcendent, at the same time manifest and present and acting in the world. It also allows us to understand the Trinity as the Mystery of the Tri-personal community, which is in relationship with the world and communicates with humanity. Finally, it emphasizes the truth that a constitutive element of the divine nature is being in relationship (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 17–20).

The most appropriate way to speak of God, therefore, according to Tamayo-Acosta, is the symbolic way.⁷ At the same time, no symbol can be ascribed an absolute

⁷ According to Tamayo-Acosta, the privileged place for the theology of symbols, and at the same time what restores and shows the importance of symbolic thinking in theology, are the sacraments. In his opinion, the theology of symbols gives priority to symbolic language over discursive language in understanding and explaining the sacraments. It allows us to present the sacraments as a dynamic reality. Finally, it combines symbol and ritual, which constitute and refer to the fundamental aspects of human life, which are religious experience and the celebration of faith (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 1995, 91–113).

character, i.e. claiming the right to capture and express adequately the fullness of the mystery of God. Therefore, divinity should not be understood in exclusive terms, but through the categories of a dynamic and harmonious relationship between what appear to be opposites, such as the fact that God can be simultaneously omnipotent and weak, present and hidden, suffering and comforting. These categories lead to a change in the understanding of God's power, which is not oppressive and does not resort to violence, but remains in a relationship that offers life to man and makes God not only God above us, but also God in us and for us (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 20; cf. Werbick 2022, 301).

Therefore, an important task facing theology today, according to the Spanish theologian, is the search for an inclusive language and an inductive model of God. The proposal of such a language and model of God has been proposed, among others, by feminist biblical and theological hermeneutics, one of whose leading representatives is Elizabeth Johnson. This theologian points out that, first, the mystery of God transcends all human conceptions, and thus cannot be described and expressed adequately through specific concepts or single theological concepts. Secondly, that the very language on the subject of God has been and is constantly evolving, and is dependent on social and cultural conditions. This can be seen, among other things, in the dominant not only in the past, but also at present, image and way of depicting God, in which man becomes, in an almost literal sense, “<paradigm of the symbol of God>, and masculinity is recognized as a category constituting the essence of divinity.” (Johnson 2002, 20–21) Accordingly, feminist theology postulates that language about God should be inclusive, so-called open to different conceptions of God, including those that come from outside Scripture.⁸ It also points to the need to take into account the truth that not only man, but also woman is the image of God. Therefore, feminist theology, on the one hand, deconstructs the patriarchal language that influences the representation of God, and on the other hand, seeks new images that can enrich the discourse about God and are born, as it were, from below, i.e., from the experience of women and their way of experiencing faith.

An example of this is Johnson's proposed translation of the name of God revealed to Moses, “I am who I am” (Exod 3:14), having an androcentric character, as “She who is.” This translation, she considers “linguistically possible, theologically sound, existentially and religiously necessary.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 95)⁹ Its advantage, according to Johnson, is that it evokes through the feminine metaphor “all the power present in the ontological symbol of absolute and relational vitality that gives

⁸ For more on the assumptions of feminist theology see Johnson 2003, 115–20.

⁹ German theologian Jörg Zink takes a similar view, believing that “we might as well say of God ‘Our Mother,’ because we cannot think otherwise than by using images. Also, the image of ‘father’ is a symbol we have created to better understand what we are thinking about . . . The word, however, is only an image, taken from our interpersonal relationships. And there is a danger, . . . that the comparison itself will take precedence over the content it should convey to us.” (2001, 98–99)

energy to the world” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 95) and affirms the value and dignity of every woman. It reveals that “divine nature is the relational mystery of life,” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 96) which bestows life and wants all creatures without exception to enjoy the fullness of life and be able to enjoy the goods offered to them by the world, which is the common home of all people. This translation finally reveals the truth that, since God is the source of life, He is at the same time the only foundation of hope for new lives not only in the future, but also right now, in a history marked by suffering and death (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 96). It finally enriches the language about God by introducing feminine symbolism into it, so that it becomes possible to emphasize and show in a new way the depth of the Divine mystery.

At the same time, the use of feminine symbolism in discourse about God cannot be about, according to Tamayo-Acosta, simply attributing to God the qualities that are traditionally associated with women and the functions they perform, because in this way one remains at the level of using stereotypes relating to what is understood by masculinity and femininity, according to the model designed by the patriarchal world. This leads, on the one hand, not only to the preservation, but also to the reinforcement of the androcentric model that feminist theology is trying to overcome. On the other hand, it does not serve at all to speak of God in a more inclusive way and in a more liberating direction (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 96–97).

3. Mysticism as an Example of Talking About God Today

It has been said that, according to the new paradigm proposed by Tamayo-Acosta, an important role in the modern discourse on God should be played, recourse to symbols, images and metaphors. This is because they affect the human imagination and are the “means” by which the incomprehensible mystery of God, which cannot be adequately captured in any concepts or terms, is best expressed. They help to experience God as completely Other and Unknowable. They thus evoke the best mystical tradition, which is the highest possible degree of religious experience and a bridge between different religions, since these at the doctrinal level not infrequently present completely different and even mutually exclusive concepts and images of God. This is unfortunately also the case within Christianity itself. An example of this is, on the one hand, the image of God that Pinochet has of Him, whose God condones persecution and the resort to violence. On the other hand, the image of God presented by Martin Luther King, who defends the equality of all people. He treats them as his children and does not allow any discrimination based on gender or skin color (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 207–8). Such an example is also the fact that religions not infrequently use God to justify war and thus prove that it is by all means right. Therefore, what provides help in overcoming such extreme concepts and images of God

not only within one religion, but also at the interreligious level, is mysticism and the mystical experience associated with it, according to the Spanish theologian.

The importance and significance of the phenomenon of mysticism is also indicated contemporary interdisciplinary studies, which note that mysticism harmoniously combines “intellect and affectivity, spirituality and theology, experience and reflection, the ability to think and love.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 213) Carmelite Cristina Kaufmann, on the other hand, looking at mysticism from a religious perspective, notes that it is an inner dynamism that enables, empowers and stimulates Christians to be open and in solidarity with others and to all creative activity. This is because it teaches an attitude of sacrifice and dedication to the selfless service to others. It transforms the human heart, and thus influences and shapes human relationships in a new way. Finally, it unites man with God, which enriches his cognitive and emotional authorities (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 213–14). Mysticism ultimately points to the goal of spiritual life, which is man’s union with God and finding Him in his soul.

What deserves to be noted, finally, is that the God of the mystics is situated above all human conceptions of Him. For, according to the mystics, we are more able to say what God is not than what He actually is. Therefore, talking about God can only be symbolic, according to Tamayo-Acosta. And although symbols point to God, they are never identical with Him, nor are they able to exhaust His mystery. Nevertheless, they bring one closer to God and allow one to experience Him as an incomprehensible Mystery that transcends all human conceptions of God and what man can express about Him through language (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 217–18).

This is evidenced, e.g., by the fact that the God of whom the mystics speak has nothing of omnipotence on the model of the mighty and rulers of this world. On the contrary, He reveals Himself as “Nothing,” that is, as pure and radical Otherness. As the God who is weak, suffering and crucified. As the One who allows Himself to be removed from the world, and yet, as God with us and helping us, because He listens to the voice of the oppressed and takes their side. He defends life and is merciful. He desires justice and to do good. He calls us to look with confidence and hope into the future, when there will be a new earth and a new heaven on the one hand, and on the other, to be involved in the transformation of this world right now.

According to Tamayo-Acosta, a similar vision of God to the mystics is presented today by liberation theology, among others. What connects it to mysticism, in addition to the image of God discussed above, is also its attention to the fact that both contemplation and practice play an important role in knowing and approaching God. For God can be reached, as Jon Sobrino states, by way of “contemplation and action” (1994, 39), or as Leonardo Boff writes of being a person “contemplative in liberation” (*contemplativus in liberatione*) (1984, 203–9; cf. also Gutiérrez 1971, 166–70). Knowing God is therefore possible, according to liberation theologians, only through prayer, contemplation, which, however, must find its realization and extension in the practice of life. In other words, it is a matter of contemplating who God is and how

He acts toward us that shapes our attitude toward our neighbors. For faith finds its fulfillment in the realization of the commandment to love God and neighbor.

Therefore, according to Tamayo-Acosta (cf. 1998, 210–211), the God who has a future is not an all-powerful God at all, but paradoxically a suffering and crucified God. A God who surrenders himself into the hands of men and allows himself to be disposed of. A God who “does not care for himself and is ready to accept any form and shape of dispossession of himself He walks with divine consistency on the path of weakness and on the path of love that is ready for anything,” (Szymik 2004, 27) who does not retreat from anything, even from accepting the cross and submitting to death. Such a God is the God revealed by Jesus Christ, who is the true *locus theologicus* of knowing God as He wanted to make Himself known. He exceeds all human expectations and ideas about Him. For He reveals Himself in a way that we do not expect (cf. Castillo 2019, 55–57). This means, according to the Spanish theologian, that the God revealed by Jesus is situated above what both political theism and theological theism say about Him. It also means that talking about God must free itself from the understanding of divinity drawn from Greek philosophy, according to which the essence of divinity includes impatience and immutability (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 1998, 218–23; cf. also Kasper 1984, 189–97; Castillo 2019, 51–54; González de Cardedal 2006, 361). Moreover, the God of Greek philosophy, which was often referred to in the past and on which the theological discourse about God was based, was “more the God of the cosmos than of man.” (Gesché 2001, 19) This often constituted one of the causes leading to unbelief and atheism, because man in contact with the Absolute thus conceived, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty expressed it, dies. Also because man today, as in every other epoch, “cannot bear, can no longer bear a God who is impatient and beyond history.” (Gesché 2001, 18)¹⁰

Therefore, there is a need to abandon the theistic God that has weighed so heavily on us, and reinvent the unknown God. It is also necessary, according to Tamayo-Acosta, to return to the God of the mystics, who present Him as the incomprehensible Mystery, “Source of all goods,” “Water of life.” Thus, to restore the validity and importance of symbolic language in discourse about God. “For all knowledge of God is ultimately symbolic knowledge. And every confession of faith in God is nothing but a symbol of faith.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 218)

¹⁰ “We must overcome the God of theological theism, which is an entity separate from other entities and a part, admittedly the most important part of the whole reality, but ultimately subordinated to the whole. This God deprives man of his subjectivity and does not allow for the development of human freedom.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 217–18)

Conclusions

The Spanish theologian's proposal on how we can and should speak about God today raises an issue that is constantly relevant. It also refers to the different images of God that are present and functioning not only within different religions, but often also within the same religion. The topicality of this issue is further indicated, on the one hand, by the religious pluralism present in modern societies, which raises the question of whether there is only one God and whether He is ultimately the God of all people? As well as the question of which religious conception of God is true? On the other hand, the fact that the word "God," however it is understood, is and will always be the primary point of reference and orientation for man to understand himself and the world (cf. Rahner 1976, 57–59). Therefore, one of the important tasks facing theology is to attempt to approximate God, who, although He has revealed Himself in history, as the Christian faith professes, still remains the Unspeakable Mystery.

The witness that conveys the truth of this revelation is the Holy Scripture. Its author is God, for in it is contained His word addressed to man, which was written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by men chosen by God, whom He used and used their abilities to "act in and through them, all and only what He Himself willed, to convey in writing as true authors." (*DV* 11) The fact that God spoke through people and in human ways requires knowing what He actually wanted to communicate to us, in which hermeneutics, which is the art of interpretation and understanding, plays an important role. It has its basis in Scripture itself and in the history of its interpretation over the centuries. The question of interpreting Scripture is also given great importance today, which has been fostered by the development of philosophical hermeneutics, which proposes a multiplicity of hermeneutical methods. As a result, the question arises as to which of these methods makes it possible to correctly understand the profound reality about which Scripture speaks, and at the same time is able to grasp and show in an appropriate way its relevance for modern man (cf. Pontificia Commissione Biblica 1993, 68–69). Such a hermeneutic, according to Tamayo-Acosta, is the hermeneutic of solidarity and feminist hermeneutics, among others. This is because the former values the ethical and communal nature of faith and takes into account the lives of marginalized groups today. The second, on the other hand, using the assumptions developed by the hermeneutics of suspicion, makes it possible to protect the interpretation of revealed texts from being subordinated to anyone's interests or any ideology.

At this point, it is worth noting that the problem that feminist hermeneutics brings with it is that the exegesis proposed by it, due to the fact that it is based on biases, can and often does lead to a very biased interpretation of biblical texts and the creation of a hypothetical reconstruction that finds no basis in the biblical texts (cf. Pontificia Commissione Biblica 1993, 62). For the rest, the Spanish theologian himself, as has been said, sees the fundamental problem of feminist theology in the

simple attribution of feminine qualities to God, since this does not lead at all to freedom from the androcentric model, which is what this type of theology seeks and sets as its essential goal. Nor does it serve to speak of God in a more inclusive way. Moreover, it “continues to foster the subordination of women, making the patriarchal symbol merely something less dangerous.” (Tamayo-Acosta 2004, 97)

Tamayo-Acosta, while stressing the importance and relevance of hermeneutics in theology, advocates the uninterrupted necessity of interpretation, i.e., one that moves in a hermeneutical circle that exists between subject and object and “knows only interpretations of interpretations that, for their part, lead to new interpretations.” (International Theological Commission 1989, A.I/1) Such an understanding of hermeneutics loses sight of what should be the goal of its search. That goal is the attempt to reach an objective and unchanging truth, that is, one that obliges in every historical situation and in every culture (cf. International Theological Commission 1988, III/I–III). It is not surprising, therefore, that the Spanish theologian, states that truth is no longer to be seen, according to the understanding of hermeneutics he proposes, as *an adaequatio intellectus cum re*, but as something that is constantly occurring and subject to constant interpretation. Thus, he comes close to the postmodern understanding of truth, which undermines and denies the existence of a single and objective truth.

This has practical consequences in Tamayo-Acosta’s proposed understanding of discourse about God, in which he advocates speaking and representing God only in metaphorical and symbolic ways. At the same time, he adds, with which it is difficult not to agree, that none of the symbols applied to God can be ascribed an absolute character, i.e. claiming the right to capture and express adequately the fullness of the mystery of God. The advantage of this proposition is that, first, speaking symbolically about God affects the imagination and serves to emphasize that God is an incomprehensible Mystery. Second, it also takes into account what modern philosophy says about the meaning and importance of symbol and symbolic thinking.

The Spanish theologian also advocates for an interpretation of theological language so that it reflects God’s universal love and solidarity with all people, regardless of gender, race or social status. He therefore insists on the need to use inclusive language in relation to God, arguing that traditional patriarchal images of God exclude the experience and perspective of women and other marginalized groups (cf. Tamayo-Acosta 2011, 310–311). In this regard, it is worth noting that inclusive language is not essentially a language that contests classic images of God, but rather an attempt to supplement and enrich them with new aspects. There is, however, a risk that this type of language can be used to combat traditional images of God and traditional ways of speaking about God, if it is subordinated to some kind of ideology and its intended goals. In this case, instead of uniting, inclusive language can become a cause of division and exclusion within religious communities of people who are attached to the traditional language of faith. This occurs when attempts are made

to impose this type of language on everyone as the only valid and most appropriate one. The excessive inclusiveness of the language about God can finally lead to the loss of specific features and nuances proper to individual religious traditions in their descriptions of God.

One of the weaknesses of the proposal presented by the Spanish theologian is that he says nothing about the fact that in Christian understanding there is a concrete reality behind the symbol, or speech using symbolic language. In other words, a truth that cannot be exchanged for other symbols and that can be put into a transmittable conceptual system (cf. Wagner 2003, 27–29). This is because the Christian faith is “the confession of truths that have a definite content, which cannot be freely interpreted, because it is unchangeable,” (Ratzinger 1982, 343) which also applies to the question of God and talking about Him. It also presupposes a community of faith, which was first the environment for the creation of the New Testament biblical texts, and then for their understanding and interpretation. Therefore, what distinguishes biblical hermeneutics from other types of hermeneutics is its particular subject matter, as well as the specific interpretive assumptions it makes (cf. Pontificia Commissione Biblica 1993, 70).

Another weakness is that the Spanish theologian, in his proposal, does not explicitly consider the Christological criterion, which is the decisive criterion in what concerns the interpretation of biblical texts. This is because this criterion lends concreteness to the professed faith, since it links the faith to an event and to the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died at a specific time and rose from the dead. It also indicates that the Christian faith goes beyond purely symbolic cognition, which does not at all mean that it negates its value and significance. What is critical to the Christian faith and its understanding is what it recognizes as truth, which cannot be exchanged for or replaced by other symbols.

Finally, the aforementioned Christological criterion fulfills an important function in what concerns understanding, presenting and speaking of the God of revelation, which is taken into account this time by Tamayo-Acosta. The fact that God has revealed Himself in a unique way in the person of Jesus Christ, who, because He is the incarnate Son of God and thus also the most perfect interpreter of God, does not at all mean that God ceases to be a hidden God. With this nevertheless Jesus Christ reveals to us the unknowable mystery, namely that God is the Father and therefore directs us to God as our Father (cf. Dupuis 1993, 9–10). Therefore, the Christian understanding and speaking of God is based on what His Son has revealed and communicated to us, which does not mean, as has been said, that God ceases to be an incomprehensible Mystery for us. However, in Christ this Mystery has become infinitely closer to us (cf. Rahner 1962, 11–13).

Such a God is spoken of, as the Spanish theologian rightly points out, by Christian mysticism, which situates God above all human conceptions of Him. Mysticism thus accentuates God’s Otherness, His unknowability and transcendence. For it is

easier to say of God what He is not than what He is, since He is “an Infinity always prior to the act of cognition, an Incomprehensibility always above all that is and can be conceived apart from Him.” (Winling 1983, 322) Mysticism, therefore, directs people back to the realm of *the sacred*, which, according to Tamayo-Acosta, should also become the primary task of theology today. For this reason, he sees mysticism as a bridge that can connect different religions and the differing concepts of God present in them. And thus as a starting point in interreligious dialogue. Finally, mysticism may be the most appropriate response to both the contemporary crisis of religiosity and the spread of atheism, since it is not uncommon for different competing and even opposing visions and images of God to be at their root. Finally, mysticism performs an important function, as it awakens and preserves people’s sensitivity to God. Therefore, the future of God from a strictly religious point of view depends, according to the Spanish theologian, on the ability of believers to present and speak properly about God, and to justify this both within their own religious denomination and through the witness of their lives in accordance with their professed faith. It depends on people who have been touched by God, as is the case with mystics, whose spiritual experience and testimony of life make God present in our world.

The Spanish theologian’s proposal ultimately has the advantage of drawing attention to the language, metaphors and images we use in our discourse about God. For his point is that with these means of expression at our disposal, we should never lose sight of the fact that our presentation and speech about God is always limited, since God is and will remain an incomprehensible Mystery. Therefore, it seems right to formulate his postulate that divinity should not be understood in exclusive terms, but by means of the category of the dynamic and harmonious relationship that exists between what appear to be opposites, such as that God can be simultaneously omnipotent and weak, present and hidden, suffering and compassionate. This postulate directs us to the God revealed by Jesus Christ, on whom, by looking at him, it only becomes clear what can be said about God. An example of this is the understanding of “the <omnipotence>, <sovereignty> of God, which only becomes clear at the manger and at the foot of the cross. Here, where God, the Lord of the universe, dies as a sacrifice given to the most miserable creature, it is only here that the concept of God’s omnipotence can truly be formulated. This is also the place where a new concept of power is born, a new concept of dominion and greatness,” (Ratzinger 1968, 114) which has nothing to do with violence, but with love that knows no bounds.

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