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Human Speech and God's Word: On a Latent Divine Attribute

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Abstract

The idea that God speaks to humans and responds to their call is often taken for granted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This paper reflects on the significance of the fact that God is *Deus loquens*: one who speaks in revelation and who is also inner Trinitarian eternal utterance. To outline an anthropology and a theology of speech, two Hungarian interlocutors are summoned: twentieth century poet János Pilinszky (1921-1981) and exegete and literary critic István Jelenits (b. 1932), whose accounts are instructive concerning the nature of human and divine communication. As a next step, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) by Pope Benedict XVI is examined, which can be seen as providing the outlines of a systematic "theology of the word." Such theology is aware that the word of God is an analogical concept rooted in the Trinitarian reality of divine communication.

Keywords

God's Word, János Pilinszky, István Jelenits, Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*

If only for this once I could speak with you
whom I loved so much. Year after year
yet I never tired of saying over
what a small child sobs
into the gap between the palings,
the almost choking hope
that I come back and find you.
Your nearness throbs in my throat.
I am agitated as a wild beast.
I do not speak your words,
the human speech. [. . .]
I do not speak your language.

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My voice is more homeless than the word!
I have no words.

János Pilinszky, "Apocrypha"[1]

That human speech and divine utterance in some way hang together has always been common knowledge in the Christian tradition. However, there are signs that the exact nature of such a relationship and, more importantly, the significance of its very existence is currently becoming an object of more systematic theological reflection on the themes of revelation, scripture and the tradition. If the Bible is God's humanly written word and if it contains God's self-revelation in the form of divine communication to people interpreted and handed down by the tradition, then speech as communication may not just be an accidental feature of God's being. Might we, perhaps, say that speech belongs to God's nature as a long known and yet unreflected divine attribute? In this paper, I shall argue that new developments in the theology of revelation and sacred scripture and a growing interest in a 'theology of the word' must have a decisive effect also on a current understanding of the doctrine of God; the God, whose central characteristic – or to use a traditional term, attribute – may rightly be considered to be speech.

As a first step, let us survey key ideas of a poet's and then a biblical scholar's accounts of the relationship between human language and God's word and the significance of the revelatory fact that God speaks. As a recent study on the concept of revelation has emphasised, revelation is, on the one hand, a direct disclosure, the revelation of revelation, in which God reveals God's own self, on the other hand, it indirectly reveals the nature of the subject of revelation.[2] To apply this idea to our question, the very fact that God speaks to humanity and that revelation takes place at all equally belong to the central message of what God wants to tell us. What, then, is the theological significance of language? For some interesting ideas on this question let us turn to a poet, who is, by profession, an expert on words and, next, to a more theologically informed treatment by an exegete, who is also a literary critic.

Towards an Anthropology and a Theology of Speech

The Hungarian poet and essayist, János Pilinszky (1921-1981) reflected on the significance of language in many of his short essays

[1] János Pilinszky, "Apocrypha", in Péter Dávidházi et al. (eds.), *The Lost Rider: A bilingual anthology* (Budapest: Corvina, 1997), pp. 415; 417.

[2] Balázs M. Mezei, *Radical Revelation. A Philosophical Approach* (London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 120-123.

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written for a Catholic weekly review between 1958 and 1981 on various themes connected to Christian faith.[3] While these short writings for the most part do not offer sustained arguments on a given topic, being suggestive rather than discursive, one may still glean from the poet's insightful intuitions and recurring ideas the outlines of an original account of the relationship between human language and divine word.[4]

Most importantly, Pilinszky sees a pivotal connection between language and love. For him, the essential function of language is to effectuate communication, create contact, establish relationship and, therefore, speech is fundamentally a process of giving and receiving, and, at the same time, a basic openness to such gifting. Remarkably, he identifies openness with love without, however, a further argumentative elaboration of this important correlation, yet one may infer from the context that openness is love inasmuch as it is a free gesture of readiness for interaction and exchange, for mutual gifting and enrichment, for giving oneself in listening and hearing. Speech, then, is essentially an act of love; its original meaning is defined by the logic of love.

As Pilinszky argues, if speech ceases being rooted in love, its original signification becomes meaningless, it fades away and speech turns over against itself: instead of developing a communicative network of love, it serves alienation, separation and rejection. Love and language are so closely interrelated that language disconnected from love as its ultimate originating source eventually undergoes serious damage, it deteriorates in an irreversible way, its 'art' becomes distorted and it cannot be cured by some linguistic attempt at reparation or any poetic effort at improvement. The cultivation of language is first and foremost linked to the grace-aided sanctification of the human person and the continual deepening of one's love. In this manner, language points beyond itself and is ultimately rooted in God, the font of eternal love.

In Pilinszky's account, language is therefore a grace, a gift of God inasmuch as it kindles light for the person, around and among us; it functions as a kind of primary philosophy by ordering and interpreting the universe and revealing connections even before such first-order thinking is expressed by the means of conceptual philosophical

[3] A collection of these essays (about five hundred pieces) was published posthumously in János Pilinszky, *Szög és olaj* [Nail and Oil] (Budapest, Vigilia, 1982), edited by István Jelenits.

[4] Key essays are in this respect: "Néhány szó a szavakról" [Some words on words], in Pilinszky, *Szög és olaj*, pp. 223-224; "Ige" [Word], Ibid., pp. 293-294; "Én Jézusom" [My Jesus], Ibid., pp. 397-399; "Isten nevét hiába ne vedd" [You shall not take the name of God in vain], Ibid., pp. 89-90; "A Szentírás margójára" [To the margins of sacred Scripture], Ibid., pp. 111-112; "Jegyzetek a Genezishez" [Notes on the Book of *Genesis*], Ibid., pp. 144-147. I present here my own rendition of Pilinszky's scattered remarks.

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reflection. Language as a God-given lantern is not only meant to shed light on one's present human condition, but is also destined to guide one on one's journey toward a final unity in God. Language is a witness to God's love for the world and a testimony to the creative action of the eternal Word, through whom and in whom everything came into being. Because the entire creation is a work of the divine Word, the entire cosmos embodies speech, in other words, relationship, and such a relationship has a final goal in the ultimate simplicity of an all-encompassing and universally meaning-conferring divine Love.

Pilinszky also comments on the way God speaks through the creation and the Word incarnate. The language God speaks is not one of disinterested statements, not even one of cold prohibitions or prudential ethical admonishment. Instead, God speaks as a lover, using the paradoxical words of someone, whose entire being is determined by passionate love. Pilinszky has moving passages to the effect that God's utterance is intimately tender even when he gives prohibitions in the Bible (such as, the prohibition to take God's name in vain), and that Jesus's harsh words (think of the words of the child Jesus to his mother when she finally finds him in the temple Luke 2:49, or the words to those who want to follow Jesus in Matthew 8:19-21) reveal the paradoxical nature, the "easy yoke" of God's love. And this is also a feature of earthly lovers whose terms of endearment are often hard words used in a radically changed meaning. Such paradoxical language is natural to poetry and so, unsurprisingly, the Hungarian poet holds that God's final condescension to the lowest spheres of creation in the incarnated Word is met by the highest form of human expression realised by the poetic use of language. In the Word incarnate God's speech takes a definitively human form and gives final legitimation for the use of human language to speak about and to God.

While Pilinszky's ideas are formulated for an essentially Christian audience, exegete (and Pilinszky scholar) István Jelenits (b. 1932), in a lecture delivered to university students, speaks to a more general public at a time (in 1980) when religion was looked upon in official propaganda with suspicion and disrespect.[5] Therefore, to introduce the God of Christians to an interested but probably atheist or agnostic audience, he must distance himself from the tradition he stands in and look for a central and distinguishing feature of the Christian idea of God that is comprehensible for someone outside that particular tradition. He finds such a feature in the biblical witness to the God who speaks: *Deus loquens*. As Jelenits argues, although divine communication as such is not unique to Christianity – the pagan gods of ancient Greece, for example, were believed to respond to

[5] István Jelenits, "*Deus Loquens*", in István Jelenits, *Élet és evangélium* [Life and Gospel] (Budapest: Új Ember, 2001), pp. 17-30. The lecture was given in 1980 to students of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary.

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people by giving advice or oracles – the God of the Christian tradition does not simply respond to occasional human queries, but, by taking the initiative and addressing a community of human persons, chooses language and speech as a means of communication, as the prime medium through which God can reveal himself. God initiates a dialogue with us and establishes a lasting and ever deepening relationship that continually enhances human capacity for grasping God's ways and the nature of God's inner being. Moreover, through such dialogue God also creates a welcoming atmosphere for the reception of his words by gently kindling human interest in hearing what God wants to tell. The dialogue started in this manner becomes a process, it has a beginning, continuation and a completion within history, and through the relationship initiated and built up by God, each person is made to recognise that her true happiness lies ultimately in God.

By taking speech as a hermeneutic key to the Christian understanding of God, Jelenits is able to explain the "logic" of the incarnation. The fact that God engages in a loving dialogue with us also implies that he accepts the conditions of human communication, so much so, that, eventually, in the incarnate Son he starts to speak in human language. After creating the proper acoustics for the hearing of the divine message through developing a certain vocabulary and accumulating the necessary experience, God takes the ultimate step and utters human words in a human manner. Jelenits also emphasises the fact that God's speech is more than just verbal utterance: it comprises deeds and events as well, which are intimately interrelated with their linguistic interpretation, and that speech and silence, revelation and veiling form two aspects of the same reality one terms communication.

What comes to the fore, even from this cursory overview of Pilinszky's and Jelenits's accounts, is the fact that an attempt to present the Christian message by drawing out the implications of the idea that God is one who speaks proves to be a useful tool for explaining key ideas of our theological system: revelation, salvation history, grace, creation, incarnation, eschatological fulfilment. However, if God speaks to us through revelation in the cosmos and in salvation history, how does this fact relate to God's inner being? In other words, is speech a freely chosen and "extrinsic" means for God to bring about creation and uphold a lasting relationship with the created world or is God also immanently eternal utterance, is speech a divine attribute that likewise characterises God's inner being?

Benedict XVI's Plea For a Systematic 'Theology of The Word'

That a more systematic exploration of the anthropology and the theology of speech is a necessary aid for understanding and creatively

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re-formulating the core of Christian teaching for our time is a central recognition of Benedict XVI's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010).[6] More than just giving guidance on problems related to sacred scripture, biblical hermeneutics, tradition and the Christian mission, this document may be read as a first systematic attempt to present the mystery of God through what the pope terms a 'theology of the word'. The many references to his own earlier thought (in homilies, addresses, encyclicals etc.) reveal his lasting interest in the issue and the conviction that an overall investigation of the significance of the word may illuminate hidden connections and contribute to a fuller understanding of the relationship between revelation, scripture and God's inner life. The quotations from patristic and later authors from the theological tradition illustrate the constant presence of Christian reflection on the word, which, however, is recognised to need a more synthetic approach. *Verbum Domini* can be seen as presenting the outlines of such a synthesising vision: what Christians risk taking for granted, the fact that God speaks and responds to our questions, is turned into a hermeneutical key which sheds new light on every aspect of Christian theory and practice.[7]

Of particular interest for our account is the way that *Verbum Domini* unwittingly echoes and further develops many of the insights that we saw above in the poet's and the biblical scholar's reflections, and the manner in which it seeks to find a focal point where various considerations may converge. For obviously, as the document states, the expression "word of God" is an analogical concept which expresses various realities: the Logos who is the eternal Word, the only Son eternally begotten of the Father; the Word who became incarnate in Jesus Christ; the Word with whom and in whom God creates the world; God's word, his voice heard in salvation history; the word of God preached by the apostles and handed down in the tradition of the church; sacred scripture as the humanly written and divinely inspired testimony to the word of God. As Pope Benedict XVI stresses, although the term has many different meanings, these are essentially interrelated and the task of current theological efforts

[6] Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* of the Holy Father Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church. http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html (10.08.2019.). This document intends to further develop the legacy of the Vatican II dogmatic constitution on revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). My account relies on Part One of the document which lays down the theoretical foundations (points 1-28.)

[7] This is also reflected by many of the subtitles of the document, such as, "The God Who Speaks", "Our Response to the God Who Speaks", "The Word of God and the Church", "The Liturgy, Privileged Setting for the Word of God", "The Word of God in the Life of the Church", "The Church's Mission: To Proclaim the Word of God to the World", etc.

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must be to show their ultimate unity. They are no mere metaphorical expressions but denote a shared reality and reveal a profound continuity among themselves.

It is not by chance that the document chooses the Prologue of the Gospel of John as a reference point since it wants to develop earlier reflection on the issue by opening up a new Trinitarian dimension: "In the beginning was the Word/and the Word was with God/and the Word was God . . . /and the Word became flesh" (John 1:1, 14). It brings into the picture the idea of the pre-existence of God's word in the inner Trinitarian life of God in a series of succinct statements: "The Word exists before creation. Consequently at the heart of the divine life there is communion, there is absolute gift . . . God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father eternally utters his Word in the Holy Spirit. Consequently the Word, who from the beginning was with God and is God, reveals God himself in the dialogue of love between the divine persons, and invites us to share in that love."[8] Although *Verbum Domini* does not develop a detailed immanent Trinitarian theology of the word, such a Trinitarian understanding of God as eternal dialogue, relationship and utterance points towards the need for the reconsideration of the traditional doctrine of God's most important characteristics. What becomes an important recognition in the accounts we have examined so far is the fact that God's utterance is not tied to his relationship to the world, but is an essential feature of the inner life of the Trinity.[9]

Speech as a Divine Attribute

Recent scholarship on the divine attributes faces the challenging question of how to harmonise philosophically constructed accounts of the distinctive features of God's nature/essence (such as, simplicity, infinity, immutability, eternity, incomprehensibility, ineffability, etc.) with the divine characteristics outlined by biblical revelation (for example, God as a person, who enters into relationship with the world, who is loving, merciful and faithful, etc.). Authors register a significant gap between these two frameworks, the overcoming of which is regarded by many as an important task for current theology.[10] What they look for is a unificatory basis, a focal point

[8] *Verbum Domini*, 6.

[9] This idea may have an analogue in Balázs M. Mezei's claim that revelation has two interrelated aspects: revelation *ad intra*, that is, within the dynamism of self-donating love of the Trinitarian persons, and revelation *ad extra*, in terms of God's self-revelation in salvation history. See Mezei, *Radical Revelation*, pp. xviii-xxi.

[10] Herbert Haag, for example, goes so far as to claim that biblical scholarship cannot rely on the idea of God as elaborated in the doctrine of God by systematic theology since

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where all the different attributes converge and form a meaningful unity, and they suggest that such a central organising attribute is love since it involves and unifies all the other attributes and accounts for their inner logic and ultimate interconnections.[11]

Moreover, current doctrines of God seek to elaborate a truly trinitarian understanding of the divine essence as constituted by the trinitarian relations. Their point of departure is the triune relations that form a unity of nature, and so their accounts of the divine attributes is also trinitarian and relational. While traditional theology associated the attributes with God's one essence and explained their variety from God's manifold relationship towards creatures of the created world, a trinitarian approach regards them in an essential unity with immanent trinitarian life.[12] In this manner love as the central divine attribute towards the world is at the same time the principal feature of the trinitarian persons and a key to trinitarian theology.

So how could speech enter the picture? I suggest that it is the missing link in recent trinitarian accounts of love as a central divine attribute. While divine love is understood in terms of communion, gift, mutual self-giving or self-revelation, the question of the mode of such reciprocal gifting is usually not addressed. And this is where a more systematic reflection on the importance of utterance/speech and the connection with love might be illuminating. Interestingly, the idea of utterance is part and parcel of the theological tradition in the intra-mental model of the Trinity that was elaborated by Augustine of Hippo: the Father as memory, the Son as Word/Utterance, and the Holy Spirit as the Will/Love that connects the two.[13] However, the idea of word seems to be entirely missing from the other, interpersonal/social model (equally present in Augustine's account) where trinitarian inner life is conceived in the analogy of a communion of persons: someone who loves, who is loved and their mutual love. In what does such love consist? If one takes seriously the poet's suggestion that love is in essence communication and that language

the latter's concerns differ markedly from the ones of the Bible. Herbert Haag, "Isten" [God], in Haag, *Bibliai lexikon* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1989), p. 698. Herbert Vorgrimler likewise registers a regrettable fissure between the philosophically constructed divine attributes and God's biblical self-revelation, which, in his view, is also reflected in the language of liturgical prayer as well. Herbert Vorgrimler, "Isten tulajdonságai" [Divine Attributes], in Vorgrimler, *Új teológiai szótár* [Neues Theologisches Wörterbuch, 2002] (Budapet: Göncöl, 2006), p. 301.

[11] See, for example, Wilhelm Breuning, "Isteni tulajdonságok" [Divine Attributes], in Wolfgang Beinert (ed.), *A katolikus dogmatika lexikona* [*Handbook of Catholic Theology*] (Budapest, Vigilia, 2004), p. 300. Wolfhart Pannenberg likewise considers love to be an adequate basis for expounding the essential continuity between the philosophical and the biblical divine attributes. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Rendszeres teológia* [*Systematische Theologie*], Vol. 1. (Budapest, Osiris, 2005), pp. 301-304.

[12] See Pannenberg, *Rendszeres teológia*, pp. 257-304.

[13] See Augustine, *The Trinity*, esp. Book IX.

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is ultimately rooted in love, then the characteristics of divine speech (both *ad extra* and *ad intra*) need to be given more systematic scholarly attention in the future.

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