

# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ANDREW LOUTH, *DISCERNING THE MYSTERY:* *AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY*

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## Abstract

*The author's aim is to provide an analysis of the current state of theology, what led to it, and what influenced it. He aims to discuss in detail the different perspectives and to provide one that is to be embraced. By making constant reference to the Fathers he wants to signal that they still have things to teach us and we should not ignore them when it comes to treat subjects so subtle as that of interpreting the Scripture or tradition.*

**Keywords:** mystery, Tradition, Scriptures, allegory, historical method.

## Introduction

Based on two lectures on „Theology and Spirituality” delivered in 1979, two years later, Professor Andrew Louth publishes the work *Discerning the Mystery*. This work is a timeless one, regarded by many scholars as a bright modern work of theology and an „avowedly traditional work”<sup>1</sup> with the finest critique and a depth of discernment. This work, which he sees as an essay, is concerned more to provoke discussion, and it seems it succeeded<sup>2</sup>, than assent on the implications had by the Enlightenment in the field of social sciences and more specific in the one of theology. His work of research is motivated by the division present in the modern theology and the negative effects caused by it. His aim is to discuss in detail the causes, the evolution, the aspects, and the consequences of this division but also the way forward from this impasse. Thus, Andrew

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<sup>1</sup> E.L. Mascall, Review of *Discerning the Mystery* by Andrew Louth, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, in „Scottish Journal of Theology”, vol. 37 (1984), p. 383.

<sup>2</sup> Linell E. Cady, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology*. By Andrew Louth. The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1983, in „Journal of the American Academy of Religion”, vol. 52 (1984), p. 622.

Louth „engages in a far-reaching exploration of the problems with and reasons for this state of affair”<sup>3</sup>. Along six chapters he examines the scientific method as a paradigm for searching the truth, how it works in the specific case of theology, and how the things change if we are to bring in our discussion concepts like that of tradition, allegory, worship, or mystery. While certain evidence prove that theology is just perception, Andrew Louth’s reflections are pointing towards the fact that theology is not just information that can be retrieved but also our action of reacting to the greatest mystery of all, „the mystery of God in Christ”. By that, the book reaches the conclusion that theology has two dimensions which cannot be separated one from another: a theoretical dimension and a practical dimension.

Although it was not an easy job to criticise a complex book as this one, the pages of my critical review will comprise both an exposition and an evaluation of the argument advanced by Andrew Louth. I will start with the exposition of the argument to which I will add a brief comment after its each man section and I will offer a full evaluation with comments and observations towards the end of the essay. In the end I will provide some conclusions and a list of references used in comprising this essay.

### **Exposition of the argument**

After setting the scene with a brief introduction in which he accommodates the reader with the context and the argument, Andrew Louth proceeds by discussing the nature of theology structuring his argument in six chapters.

In chapter one, „Dissociation of sensibility”, Andrew Louth discusses the dissociation between thought and feeling that started to exist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the case of art and theology. The author identifies the Enlightenment as the cause of this phenomenon and the Romantics as an example of this dissociation at work and shows to what extent we are still the captives of the Enlightenment<sup>4</sup>. Divided in theology and spirituality, or theology and religious

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<sup>3</sup> Linell E. Cady, *Discerning the Mystery...*, p. 622.

<sup>4</sup> John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning the Mystery*, Oxford University Press, London, 1983, în „Religious Studies”, vol. 20 (1984), p. 305.

studies, theology loses its purpose and the usefulness of its study or the usefulness of prayer is undermined. Where for the Fathers such a division was not possible, today we find theology and spirituality related but not as closely as it used to be and God is displaced as the object of study of theology. If during the Fathers' centuries we do not find traces of this kind of dissociation, some appear during the medieval period. Thus, the awareness of the theories that developed during the medieval period helps exploring what gave birth to the things that shaped the history of the world in which we live today. Renaissance is the moment when the place of Tradition was shaken. The truth stopped being something inherited and started to be something that could be attained by applying a certain method, destroying altogether the notion of Tradition. The scientific method is an experimentalist one and once applied, for example in mathematics, leads one to an objective truth by eliminating the individuality of the experimenter. This led to a division of two languages in which the truth can be expressed: the language of mathematics and the language of words. The extension of the scientific method to history, art, or theology resulted in making from the method and the technique the heart of the subject. The method is more difficult to apply in humanities than in sciences because the subject of the experiment cannot be fully abstracted and isolated from the social, temporal, and rational dimensions. One way of solving these difficulties is our present experience as an assessment criterion for the past statements. As a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment the Romantics sought to see historically through a historical critical method everything as equally important and immediate to God. This costed theology a crisis of confidence by dissociating it from the heart of the subject and making it inaccessible. The theology became dominated by the historical-critical method.

The second chapter, „The legacy of the Enlightenment”, starts with the difference between sciences and humanities in terms of the lower grade progress witnessed in the case of the later compared with the former. In order to liberate the theology of all this mess, Andrew Louth starts first to liberate the humanities as whole, method of which Mascall doubts to be useful one<sup>5</sup>. Using Giambattista

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<sup>5</sup> E.L. Mascall, *Review of Discerning the...*, p. 384.

Vico's argument, the author states that the same rules that apply to mathematics does not work in case of humanities because the human person, not being their creator, cannot master all their aspects. The only exception to this rule is the human history by way of metaphor and imagination, a way different from the scientific one. Arriving at the point where between natural sciences and humanities can be noticed the gap created by this last methodology, Louth brings into discussion Wilhelm Dilthey's contribution. Dilthey explains how the natural sciences and the humanities differ from one another and how in the case of the later the methodology that works is a sympathetic one through expressions and the principle of coherence. After interpreting the data, the author reaches the core of the Dilthey's hermeneutics, represented by the act of reflecting in the mind the experiences of another. However, Louth adds that this approach has certain failures: it creates a „hermeneutical circle” – an „interplay in the understanding between the tradition and the interpreter”<sup>6</sup> and it has a simplistic view about cultures. This historical-critical method of interpreting employs an ideal of objectivity derived from natural sciences concerned with space that does not work in the case of humanities. The humanities are more concerned with time than with space. Then, Louth uses the critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer to show how the tradition is weakened by the modern historical consciousness and the false objectivity that it provides due to the connaturality and unique relation that exists between each interpreter and the author. Against engagement with the author, Gadamer seeks an engagement with what the author said, for him the hermeneutic circle means understanding and attempts to reinstate tradition. All that is involved in the process is about an understanding obtained through a conversation in which we are open to listen and learn.

In the third chapter, „Science and Mystery”, Andrew Louth discusses the relation between theology and science. In the modern way of understanding the concept of science, theology ceases to be a science due to the fact that in its heart, the theological procedures are not those of the natural sciences but those of the humanities. In God's action of self-revelation through grace or in the social and moral realm the experimental method is inappropriate.

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<sup>6</sup>John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 305.

Then, the author compares the visual perception of Michael Polanyi with the logic of question and the answer of Collingwood and concludes that they are similar. The idea is that the way of understanding in the sciences is the same as the way of understanding in humanities and this pattern of knowing is something familiar to theologians that can be found only in the Tradition of the Church. For the Fathers, participation in the tradition meant the acceptance of the Church's rule of faith and the acceptance of the framework of preconceptions. For us they are the vivid example that theology is not concerned merely with what people think about God but with God himself<sup>7</sup>. The progress recorded in sciences, like in physics, can be observed in humanities especially in those disciplines that have aspects that can be regarded as scientific. The aspects that are non-scientific remain to be understood by the type of engagement discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, Louth engages the concept of problem in relation with the concept of mystery discussing the notions found at Gabriel Marcel, and draws the contrast that at the heart of humanities the concern is with mystery and at the heart of sciences the concern is with the problematic. Therefore, the humanities cannot achieve the same success as the sciences do due to the fact that only the problem-solving processes can be successful whereas the contemplation of the mystery cannot be evaluated in the same terms. Here, the discipline of theology has more to do and more in common with the humanities than with the sciences<sup>8</sup>. Theology contains many such mysteries that cannot be unveiled if they are not unveiled by God himself and any violent attempts from the man's part without God's contribution ends in heresy.

In the fourth chapter, „Tradition and the tacit”, Andrew Louth brings into discussion two concepts that have been treated mere in a few lines in the last three chapters: Tradition and the tacit. Starting with the concept of Tradition he treats the distinction between words and actions stressing the importance of actions or reality in the Christian life and how the understanding of the Greeks of „paideia” has been assimilated in the theology of the Fathers. The „Christian paideia”, the teaching and the learning within the

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<sup>7</sup>E.L. Mascall, *Review of Discerning the...*, p. 384.

<sup>8</sup>John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 306.

Christian community, restores the truly human culture that is learnt within the community of faith. Because the community is moved by love, it provides the necessary tradition according to which the signs and words are understood in a shared manner. Using the Augustine's example of the ladder with seven steps, Louth shows the importance of the spiritual ascent to the knowledge of God with an approach to the Scriptures. But he sees Tradition as something even deeper, as a direct link with God through the tradition of the divine sending of Christ and of the apostles, something that has been lived and not an ideology. Tradition is an example of man's dependence on his fellows for transmitting the rule of faith which is not only a message but also a practice as the spiritual director is an organ of the tradition. The truths that are transmitted can be appraised and understood only in the bosom of the Church and with the help of the Holy Spirit. By that, Tradition becomes, alongside Scripture, another way of talking about the inner life of the Church. The Liturgy is the easiest way of access in the context where the significance of the Tradition can be better observed through both the part of the Liturgy that can be articulated and through the one that it cannot. The best way to see Tradition is to be silent, in contrast with Scripture that is words. The tacit dimension lies at the heart of tradition. It is compulsory to acknowledge the role of Tradition for theology because Tradition as tacit dimension represents the meeting place between the theologian and God. If Tradition is eliminated, the meeting point disappears.

In the fifth chapter, „Return to allegory”, Andrew Louth touches the Fathers' use of allegory when they interpreted the Scriptures as a way of reaching the tacit depths of its message. Sadly, the allegory had a continuous history of challenges and questioning from Augustine until today's place within modern interpretation of Scriptures. Two reasons are at the foundation of this hard history: allegory was accused that it ignores the objective meaning of Scripture and that it is against the principle of *sola scriptura*, because the Scripture cannot have multiple senses. Thus, allegory „runs counter to” the concept of historical-critical method. By the principle of *sola scriptura*, the emphasis is not made on the living aspect of the Word of God anymore but on the written aspect which is wrong. Louth joins this principle with the principle of *method* of understanding the „original meaning” of a text by understanding the author's

original intention, understanding that it cannot be reached, because the only understanding acquired is a different one and not at all the genuine one. This is due to the fact that in the process of writing the Scriptures there was involved something called inspiration. The inspiration is what made them possible to speak continually with a fresh authority. The Tradition, the life of the Church from their days to ours, is what unites us with the writers of the Scripture. The Scriptures fed the Tradition and the Tradition provided the environment for interpreting the Scripture. Given to the principle of inspiration and to the fact that the Scriptures have not one but many senses, the Fathers adapted them by using the allegory. As John McIntyre states about Louth, it is from the Fathers that „he draws heavily in propounding the central part which allegory plays”<sup>9</sup>. The method of allegory does not ignore the „original meaning” of the Scriptures but it focuses our attention on what the text has to say in order to gain a better understanding of it. In this context, Cady states that the difference between the Fathers and the modern interpreters of Scripture is that the formers „did not make the mistake of assuming that theological truth was something objective to be found in the ‘original meaning’ of the scriptural text”<sup>10</sup>. The mystery is the last difficulty posed by the Scripture and to it the allegory holds us before. However, allegory is not a method for solving the difficulties of the Scripture but one for discerning the mystery. The mystery cannot be solved but it can be missed. The author sees the allegorical sense as something to which we move from the literal sense. The literal sense represents the object of our belief, God meets us in history, and the allegorical sense represents our attempt to understand the mystery that we discern. Having its best expression in the liturgy, the allegory is also a way of praying. The allegory helps discerning the pattern that consists of the move from fragment to unity by responding to that love of God in Christ. Therefore, allegory is part of Tradition because it facilitates the access of the modern believer to Scripture.

The sixth chapter, „Living the mystery”, turns out to be more the conclusion of the last five chapters than a proper chapter. Louth argues that theology is not able to become scientific and

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<sup>9</sup>John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 306.

<sup>10</sup>Linell E. Cady, *Discerning the Mystery...*, p. 622.

thus use the analogy of the scientific method for the humanities, i.e. the historical critical method. Theology is not something concerned only with the intellectual or something that can be studied in lecture rooms<sup>11</sup> and assessed by studying but something that is lived outside all of these, in communion with God and with the others. The use of allegory as instrument for interpreting the Scripture can repair the connection that once existed between prayer, theology, and worship by having love as its focus. These also will be the things that will help articulating the lived aspect of theology. In Louth's view tradition is an opening up of the whole enterprise of theology and something that finds expression in prayer. If all the theory that we need we find in books, the model of applying it is represented by the saints present in the Tradition of the Church. What the Enlightenment did wrong to Tradition was to dissolve man's sense of tradition and his solidarity with the past. The only way in which theology can bring knowledge and be one of the ways of pursuing knowledge is by keeping the access open to the Tradition from which we can behold and focus on the mystery of God. A true mystery can never be solved and this is why the incarnation of God's Son and his entire life lived among us can never be unravelled by scientific ways but we engage with it and live it. Christ's life, death, and resurrection are the examples where we meet the mystery of God. This meeting is made possible by the fact that man was created in the image of God. This is why theology is not only a matter concerned with the intellect but it is a combination between a mind that believes and a heart that is found in a right state. All this is assessed and expressed by a life lived by the man after Christ's commands, who represents the mystery and the object of our faith, the „living mystery”.

### **Evaluation of the argument**

Since in the opening section of his book the author himself stated that „it is not a definitive statement, but rather a suggestion intended to provoke not so much assent as discussion”<sup>12</sup>, in the

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<sup>11</sup> E.L. Mascall, *Review of Discerning the...*, p. 385.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Louth, *Discerning the mystery: An essay on the nature of theology*, Clarendon P., Oxford, 1983, p. xi.

following lines I will try to discuss his work not so much for what he did not succeed to accomplish but to offer an exposition of the ideas and insights placed in it, the value of the argument, and the importance of its contribution to the hermeneutic and theological fields.

This book is a significant work and represents a weighty attempt to reorient the interpretation of Scripture. It represents an informed defence against the seize of theology by the scientific mentality of the Enlightenment and, in the same time, a genuine manifesto for the true understanding of the Patristic Theology as Tradition and connection between the Early Church and the Church from today. As Mascall puts it, the book argues in favour of a true dimension of theology that today faded but is not yet suppressed, in many universities non-denominational departments of Religious Studies have been organised<sup>13</sup>.

Observing the main failures and philosophical and ethical dissociation of the modern projects of epistemology, Andrew Louth offers a fresh apology of the traditional way of doing theology in the Orthodox field. He is original by making a strong case for allegory and by offering a „third programme to occupy our attention”<sup>14</sup> in all it concerned concepts such as: theology, tradition, mystery etc. Its authentic environment is an open one, of experiential engagement in the ecclesial field of the mystery proper to the wisdom of the Fathers. This kind of hermeneutics finds itself promoted by the post-critical philosophies of Gadamer, Polanyi or Marcel. It suggests the presence of stakes and the philosophical perspective played by the Fathers, by theology understood as „living” and „discernment of the Mystery”, and guaranteed by the Tradition of the Church. The contemporaneous is projected in the vertical horizon of the relative paradoxical mystery of Revelation.

The author achieved his aim by showing what damages the Enlightenment and the Romantics brought to theology, by naming some of the aspects in which the scientific method altered the study of theology, and by describing the actual relation between tradition, mystery, and faith in the field of theology. In the end, the author showed the importance of allegory in discerning the mystery of

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<sup>13</sup>E.L. Mascall, *Review of Discerning the...*, p. 386.

<sup>14</sup>John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 307.

God in Jesus Christ by making it a living mystery in each one's life. What this book brings to the already existent body of knowledge is a theoretical approach of the way in which the Scripture is interpreted. Mainly it discusses why the scientific methods do not apply to humanities and how the historical-critical method does not work in the case of theology as it is expected to as an analogue method of the sciences for the humanities. The book is in a close but critical relationship with other books that similarly discuss these themes offering insights both about its strong and weaker points. It offers the reader the possibility to access other views and gain a deeper knowledge of the subject. Andrew Louth makes reference to different authors from different sections of the humanities: critics, interpreters, historians, and philosophers. He is arguing both diachronically and synchronically and discusses statements of the authors from the time of the Early Church (e.g. Augustine, Irenaeus, Basil of Caesarea, John Cassian, Thomas Aquinas) until recent (Descartes, J. Danielou, J. H. Newman, E. Kant, F. Schleiermacher) and also affirmations and ideas of contemporary authors (R. Bultmann, G. Marcel, M. Polanyi, Y.M.J. Congar). In terms of what is missing in this book is a treatment of the third type of hermeneutics, i.e. „reader hermeneutics”. Where the author discussed the modern and post-modern methods of interpreting the Scriptures, a few paragraphs about the „reader hermeneutics” would have been welcomed for a more comprehensible view.

The methodology used by the author is a complex one, not using just one type of approach but many. In the introduction to his book, Andrew Louth states that the approach of this book is „to examine” as in the case of „the lot bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment”<sup>15</sup>. In the first chapters he used a qualitative review of the situation and analysed the causes and the implications of the main theories. Towards the end of the book the analyses gained a personal flavour due to the fact that the author chose to add to the discussion along with the argument his personal reflection concerning tradition, inspiration, mystery etc. In my opinion, this led to the result that the book contains both objective and subjective aspects of the author. However, this does not undermine the validity of the results. They are still reliable due to the balanced argument

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Louth, *Discerning the mystery...*, p. xi.

met on the most part of the book. To discuss the results, the author chose to use the same analytical framework as in the beginning of his work. He used a qualitative research in order to show the results reached by his endeavour but also to illustrate the ideal state of the problem.

His argument is strongly consistent and complex. The author states the problem by saying that theology reached an impasse (i.e. „division”) due to the Enlightenment that, in order to reach truth, forced the humanities to create an analogue method (i.e. the historical critical method) and to apply it as a general method to all its branches. He claims that the division in modern theology has its roots in the Enlightenment, that the scientific method as a paradigm for searching the truth cannot be applied in humanities, that allegory not only is part of the tradition but also „draws out hidden depths of it”<sup>16</sup>, that the way forward for the theology is under the protection of tradition, and that theology should be a „living mystery”<sup>17</sup>. The argument is structured on six consistent chapters but sometimes the variations of themes becomes hard to follow<sup>18</sup>, especially when in the third and the fourth chapters there are many concepts brought in discussion at a time. The text relies mainly on theoretical evidence exposed in a pro-and-against manner but we can also find facts from the life of the Church. The evidence is valid and reliable because it leaves the reader to reach himself the conclusions towards which the text goes to and, as McIntyre puts it, „the commentary upon the whole question of the nature of method is extremely perceptive”<sup>19</sup>. The evidence supports the argument in an effective way being evidence extracted from or used by other renown critics of the subject. The justified conclusion drawn by the author is that „theology is not just perception of, but response to, the mystery of God in Christ”<sup>20</sup>.

The style of the book suits both the scholar well acknowledged with the theoretical principles discussed here but also and the not so well-informed reader by taking care to explain and introduce one in the question in case. However, I have to agree with John

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

<sup>18</sup> John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 307.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 306.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Louth, *Discerning the mystery...*, p. xiv.

Mcintyre that sometimes the concept of Tradition is not so clearly articulated leaving the reader in confusion as to what the author might refer<sup>21</sup>. In the same context of Tradition, another critique is brought to this work by Linell E. Cady. He states that Professor Andrew Louth „has not distinguished sufficiently between an engaged but critical stance vis-à-vis tradition and uncritical embrace of it as a precondition for theological insight”<sup>22</sup>. The concept of „tradition” is discussed in different ways in the different theologies and denominations existent today, and this is why it would need a further clarification. The organizing principle of the text is structured chronologically by starting with the causes, continuing with the development of the process, and finishing with the consequences and the way forward.

It is a book where both parties, those against and those in favour of the historical-critical method for interpreting the Scripture, can find something useful for their arguments. As W.R. Ward described this work, „the author has put so much reflection and learning into a work at once of apologetic and polemic”<sup>23</sup>. Those against the historical-critical method are able to find well described and informed their own position with arguments and examples that prove their point. Those in favour of the historical-critical method could use Professor Louth’s essay as a challenge for their argument and bring new evidence in order to refute his argument and prove that they are right. Each party has something to learn from this book.

Another important aspect of this book is represented by its complexity and the number of themes it approaches. Starting with broad themes like the sciences and humanities he ends by discussing others such as, faith, mystery, tradition, and allegory. Even if the author aimed to discuss five main themes, along the discussion he made numerous references to other important and related themes to the subject (e.g. the Fathers’ way of interpreting the Scripture, the rule of faith, the example of the saints etc.). New concepts and authors (e.g. Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Barr, Elliot,

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<sup>21</sup> John McIntyre, *Andrew Louth. Discerning...*, p. 306.

<sup>22</sup> Linell E. Cady, *Discerning the Mystery...*, p. 623.

<sup>23</sup> W.R. Ward, *Discerning the Mystery. An essay on the nature of theology*, by Andrew Louth, pp. xiv + 150. Oxford University Press, 1983, in „Journal of Ecclesiastical History”, vol. 34 (1983), p. 639.

Newman) were added to the discussion to which the author made reference many times again. This led me to the point where I had to choose only some of these themes to refer to in the pages of my essay leaving some of them discussed in only one or two lines or not discussed at all.

In conclusion, by way of this book, Andrew Louth discussed something that had remained too long undiscussed and ignored and he offered a solution to the problem from a different Christian perspective which, for a Christian Orthodox believer is very suitable. Written with vivacity and erudition, with sensibility and taste, Andrew Louth's essay represents a subtle and intelligent way of doing the Apology of Christian Tradition, meeting to the cultural exigencies of the contemporaneous intellectual. By means of all these qualities, his book *Discerning the Mystery* becomes a requisite guideline for all that are preoccupied by the fascinating question of the nature and development of Tradition.