"Joy to the World":
Understanding the Event of "God Becoming Human" through a Gadamerian Hermeneutic

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ABSTRACT

The "linguistic turn" in the philosophy of language, since the beginning of twentieth-century, has ascertained that all our cognitive consciousness are linguistically constituted and hence debunked any notion of pre-reflective consciousness. This paper will argue that, as a revelatory event, the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as God's self-communicative act can be better construed through the use of the philosophical understanding of the "linguistic turn". In this endeavour, the reflections on the event of Incarnation by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who sees it as an epitome of linguistic philosophy, are employed. The author contends that this could provide a fresh impetus to understand the mystery of the divine incarnation as linguistically-mediated God's communicative act toward creation. Also, it helps one to understand that such a divine communication accommodates the limitations of human linguistic phenomenon. And, as within the divine economy, the two theological foci—incarnation and atonement—capture the whole essence of Jesus Christ's person and work, the significance of Christ's atonement as a redemptive act of God can be better understood as God's continuing speech-act to invite humanity for a participation in the proleptic joy of God's fellowship.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Lukan narrative, as recorded in the nativity account, the angel of God brings an extraordinary message to a few nondescript shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem. He proclaims to them, "Do not be afraid. *I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people*." (Luke 2:10-11;NIV) The audience of a few nondescript shepherds sits well within the motif of the Gospel accounts, especially, the Lukan account—God choosing the weak and the unwise to shame the powerful and the wise—and thus contrasts and highlights the utmost significance of the announcement. As this good news unfolds, it is the birth of the Saviour, who is the Son of God. The Greek words μεγάλην χαρὰν (great joy) in the accusative case are translated with the causal implications of this message as it qualifies the "good news" in

εὐαγγελίζομαι (I bring good news).[1] The Gospel according to John encapsulates this "cause for great joy" succinctly in the phrase "the Word becoming Flesh."[2] The event of the incarnation of the divine Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, follows the general paradigm of God's self-revelation in the history of Israel, only to be culminated in this particular event of God's ultimate revelation of Godself. Yet, this self-communication of Godself to humanity is not possible to be fully comprehended by the finite human creatures.

As the infinite can never be exhausted by the finite, the manifestation of this infinite mystery in the enfleshing of the Word is essentially bound by the limitations of the creaturely world.

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1   NIV translates as "that will cause" whereas many other translations use "of" great joy.

2   John 1:14

In other words, it is God's accommodation to humanity within which this revelation happens—when the divine Logos becomes human. John Calvin pondered, "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us?"[3] The traditionally affirmed hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus Christ is a mystery that exhausts all human expressions. Calvin also observed, "Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as to accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. *To do this He must descend far beneath His loftiness.*"[4] And this condescension of God in human form is the epitome of God's communication which constitutes the aforementioned cause of great joy to all people. This conception of the need for God to accommodate to the human conceptual limitation had faded away with the Enlightenment euphoria of the "almighty Reason." But, in due time, when the illusion of such an "omnipotent" human Reason was lifted off, a right recognition that comprehends and articulates human finitude and cognitive constraint were brought through the "linguistic turn" of the twentieth-century.

Both, in the German tradition of the philosophy of language and the Anglo-American linguistic philosophy, it has been brought to the fore that "the limits of my knowledge are the limits of my world" (i.e. of how I believe the world to be).[5] Such a critique of the Enlightenment inspired "pure reason"

detranscendentalizes reason and establishes "language as constitutive of thought."[6] Thus, the constitutive role ascribed to language elevates it to the position that was traditionally held by "consciousness."[7] But, as Crista Lafont warns, recognizing the essential linguistic character of human consciousness should not lead us to the myth that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (i.e. of the world that I can talk about).[8] However, keeping Lafont's caveat in mind, we can utilize this "linguistic turn", that locates all our cognitive consciousness as linguistically constituted, to provide a fresh impetus to understand the mystery of the divine incarnation as linguistically-mediated God's communicative act toward creation. Also, it helps us to understand that such a divine communication accommodates the limitations of human linguistic expressions. As Calvin rightly noted, "For because our weakness does not attain to His exalted state, the description of Him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it," this mode of divine communication exhausts all human conceptual ability.[9] In this endeavour, Hans-Georg Gadamer's interpretation of the event of the Incarnation provides fresh insights and will be explored at length in this paper.

In the divine economy, the two theological foci – incarnation and atonement – capture the whole essence of Jesus Christ's person and work. This paper will argue that, as a revelatory event, the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as God's self-communicative act can be better construed through the use of the philosophical understanding of the "linguistic turn". And also, the significance of Christ's

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3 Emanuel V. Gerhart, "Institutes of the Christian Religion.," in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, 1894, 31, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=h8h &AN=37268859&site=ehost-live, accessed on 06/01/2017.

4 Ibid. Emphasis mine.

5 Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, trans. José Medina (MIT Press, 1999), iii.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Gerhart, "Institutes of the Christian Religion.," 31.

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atonement as a redemptive act of God can be better understood as God's speech-act to invite humanity for a participation in the proleptic joy of God's fellowship. For this purpose, this paper will greatly rely on the insights of the German philosophy of language tradition, especially the linguistic turn of the twentieth–century. The first section will discuss the linguistic turn in philosophy that recognises language not as a mere tool but as a constitutive element in human understanding. The second section will evaluate Gadamer's proposal that identifies incarnation as the ultimate paradigm of linguistic philosophy. His use of the traditional verbum interius and his musings on Trinitarian relations and their implications for incarnation will be discussed. The final section will pursue the atonement as a continued invitation to participate in the joy of God's communion.

II. THE LINGUISTIC TURN

A. Rejection of Language as a Mere Instrument

In the traditional conception, the role of language was often relegated to that of a mere tool that mediates the subject-object relation. Thus, language was conceived just as a medium for the expression of some prelinguistic thoughts.[10] This purely instrumental view of language was sustained by a conception of an "invariable human reason" that served as the foundation of the philosophy of language from Aristotle to Kant.[11] But this trend has been seriously questioned in the German philosophy of language tradition, popularly called the Hamann-Herder-Humbolt tradition (and also

in Anglo-American linguistic philosophy.) Hamann and Herder challenged the Kantian notion of "pure reason" that exists independent of language and critiqued the idea of language as a mere instrument for "fixing and communicating the experience of the world."[12] They noted that relegating the function of language to its designating function makes it merely as an "intraworldly tool" for representing objects that exist independently of it.[13] They contended that reason cannot be conceived as "alingual" because reason itself is only a "linguistic reason."[14] Hamann categorically stated, "[W]ithout the word, [there is] neither reason nor world."[15] Humboldt followed through Hamann-Herder critique and advances the rejection of the view of language as a mere system of signs to be used as a 'tool' for the transmission of prelinguistic thoughts.[16] Humboldt reiterates his claim by stating, "Whatever man is able to think he is also able to say."[17] In the Anglo-American tradition, an almost identical insight is found in J. Searle's principle of "expressibility": "whatever can be meant can be said."[18] Furthermore, this realization has effected the detranscendentalization of reason, as reason "comes to be unavoidably situated in the midst of a plurality of natural languages, which cannot guarantee the unity of reason in the same way as could the extrawordly

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10 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 7.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 6.

14 Ibid., citing Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophie in Deutschland*, 1831-1933, (1983),109.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 14 citing A. Flitner and K. Giel (ed), *Werke: Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, vol.V (Stuttgart, 1963), 433.

17 Ibid.

18 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 19-21.

standpoint of a transcendental subject."[19] Such a relativization of reason was understood as inevitable in all cognitive processes and also amplified the human epistemic limitations. Lafont observes that the application of this critique makes it possible to view language in its various constituting functions and this constitutive understanding of language has provided a Copernican revolution in the linguistic philosophy.[20]

B. Identity between Language and Thought

Another facet of this linguistic turn is the establishment of identification between thought and language, *contra* the traditional dichotomy between them.[21] Humboldt observes, "[W]

ords and their syntax simultaneously shape and determine our concepts."[22] In other words, it is the identity of thought and language that determines the philosophical dimension of the study of language. He observes,

> Intellectual activity, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes, through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. But the former is also intrinsically bound to the necessity of entering into a union with the verbal sound; thought cannot otherwise achieve clarity, nor the representation become a concept.[23]

There are no prelinguistic reflections independent of language and all mental conception are essentially language constituted and mediated. Only by its essential identification with speech (language), thought/concept comes into being. Humboldt argues against Kant saying "intellectual activity and language are one and inseparable from each other; we cannot even consider one as generative and the other as generated."[24] For in language—in the word (*verbum*) only—"a dual unity, of sound and concept, comes together."[25] Here, the ontological unity between the conceptual word and the uttered word is established. And, this identification of thought to language signals the quintessential linguistic turn.

Humboldt also reiterates the "participative"

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19 Ibid., 15.

20 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 14.

21 There are alternative views that challenge this identity between language and thought. In phenomenological studies and also in psychological research, the notion that language alone gives rise to thought is challenged. Merleau-Ponty and Edmond Husserl argue that cognition is possible without language. (Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London: Routledge, 1962) and E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, (Dordrecht: Klewer, 1989). D. R. Griffin, G. B. Speck note that research among monkeys show that they are capable of making decisions on the basis of judgments of whether a given stimulus is familiar or not, which is difficult to explain without episodic memory. Jordan Zlatev and Johan Blomberg, "Language may indeed influence thought," in *Frontiers in Psychology* v.6, 2015 accessed at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4628110/ citing D. R Griffin, and G. B. Speck, "New evidence of animal consciousness," Animal Cognition 7 5–18, 2004. They also point to the fact that chimpanzees and orangutans seem to be capable of planning for the immediate future. These studies may allude to the possibility of thought without the presence of syntactical and semantic structure of a linguistic system. However, it is also noted that this does not in any way endorse the mere instrumentality of language for communication of thoughts. Citing Chomsky, Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom aver that "people's use of language does not tightly serve utilitarian goals of communication but is an autonomous competence to express thought." Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom, *Natural language and natural selection*, Volume 13, Issue 4 December 1990 , pp. 719. Zlatev and Blomberg agree with Katherine Nelson as they conclude that "there are forms of thinking that are indisputably linguistically mediated: internal speech, complex planning, and an autobiographic self-concept." Zlatev and Blomberg, "Language" citing Katherine Nelson,

Language in Cognitive Development. The Emergence of the Mediated Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Thus, despite a few opposing views, there is a wide consensus that language plays a constitutive role in such "linguistic thought."

22 Ibid., 20 citing A. Flitner and K. Giel, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, 54-55.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., citing A. Flitner and K. Giel, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, 152-3.

25 Ibid.

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role of language in "the formation of representations."[26] Humboldt avers that the knowledge of language and knowledge of the world are inextricably interwoven. He says: "Just as no concept is possible without language, so also there can be no object for the mind, since it is only through the concept, of course, that anything external acquires full being for consciousness."[27] Thus, language can be no more relegated as a mere tool of reference for human consciousness to grasp reality. It is language that constitutes thought and hence consciousness itself. Lafont rightly concludes that these two aspects of rejection of language as a tool and identification of language and thought establish the role of language as "constitutive of thought, [traditionally attributed to consciousness] and by recognizing accordingly the double status of language as both empirical and transcendental."[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer, following in the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition, applies these notions to his hermeneutical understanding.

III. LOGOS AND LANGUAGE

A. Revelation and "Language as Worldview Discloser"

Gadamer extends the notion of identity between language and thought as "revelation" (*Offenbarmachen*) through the Christian concept of the "incarnation". He notes,

> … the Greeks . . . did not have a word for what we call language" …. This initial "forgetfulness of language in Western thought" is remedied to some extent, not by

a Greek, but by a Christian idea of special significance in the Middle Ages: the idea of incarnation …. With this idea, it is possible to view *the relation between thought and language* not merely as instrumental, but as a "revelation" (*Offenbarmachen*) in which the word is not distinguished from that which it reveals, but is something that "has its being in its revealing."[29]

Gadamer conceives the identity between language and thought, which is the main plank of the linguistic-turn, as "revelation" and he identifies the Christian conception of incarnation as a paradigm that explicates this understanding.[30] John Arthos remarks on this saying, "Therefore what struck Gadamer was not simply an anticipation of the intimate unity of thought and speech, but the feat of imagination that conceived the unity of transcendent and immanent being. Just so deep is the meaning of language."[31] Gadamer saw great potential in the use of the idea of the Christian incarnation to explicate his hermeneutical understanding.[32]

Gadamer embarks on his exploration of the divine *verbum* in order to elaborate the hermeneutical understanding as he conceived that "Language elevates everything inadvertently, as if by itself, to a more universal, higher level; and, on the other hand, the spiritual can only assert itself through language.[33] Such is the close affinity Gadamer perceived between language and divine *Verbum*, that he concludes that "spiritual can only assert itself through language." Arthos notes that for Gadamer, the

26 Ibid., citing A. Flitner and K. Giel, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, 153.

27 Ibid., 25 citing A. Flitner and K. Giel, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, 59.

28 Ibid., 4.

29 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2 Revised edition. (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 421 et passim.

30 Ibid., 89.

31 John Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 6.

32 Arthos says, "This gives some sense of the scope I believe Gadamer gives to the verbum as a contribution to what he calls hermeneutic understanding." Ibid.

33 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 158–9.

Word of God is revealed in human history, "as the nexus between the transcendent and immanent procession will be a kind of touchstone for the idea of discursivity."[34] As Lafont notes, Gadamer is highlighting the elevation of language to a quasi-transcendental state, that allows him to construe the Christian incarnation – the unity of the transcendent and the immanent being – as a prototypical linguistic phenomenon.[35] She notes,

> … the most important task confronting the thinking of the Middle Ages, had to do with the relationship between human speech and thought. Here dogmatic theology relied chiefly on the prologue to the Gospel of John and, although theology was applying Greek ideas to its own theological tasks, philosophy acquired by this very means a dimension foreign to Greek thought.[36]

Because Gadamer perceived a prototypical relation between the mode of God's communication through the incarnation of the Logos and the evident identification of language and thought in the linguistic phenomenon, he interprets the use of Greek notion of Logos as not being a foreign notion but as a relational concept. He states, "The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word."[37]

Arthos notes, for Gadamer, "[t]he indivisible bond between the word and the person is a fuller ontological relation than simply the unity of the spiritual and material."[38] He further notes that, in Gadamerian understanding "[t]he innovation of the doctrine of the word is to reverse the trend set in motion with the Greeks that the reasoning faculty distills the mind's work from the accidents of the flesh. Logos is rather the fully embodied medium of human community."[39] For Gadamer, the embodiment of the Logos is the bold statement of God that overcomes the spiritual-material divide within human finitude by "concentrating history, being, and action into the single locution, the 'Word.'"[40]

Gadamer expands further saying,

> If the Word became flesh and if it is only in the incarnation that spirit is fully realized, then the logos is freed from its spirituality, which means, at the same time, from its cosmic potentiality. The uniqueness of the redemptive event introduces the essence of history into Western thought, brings the phenomenon of language out of its immersion in the ideality of meaning, and offers it to philosophical reflection. For, in contrast to the Greek logos, the word is pure event.[41]

The manner in which Gadamer infers meaning for the history of philosophy through his "linguistic" understanding of the incarnation restates the central importance of this phenomenon for his philosophy of hermeneutics. He avers that the redemptive significance of the event of the Logos

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34 Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 12.

35 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 5.

36 Ibid.

37 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 139. Gadamer refers to the Johannine proclamation in John 1:14, "the Word became flesh" as a greater miracle of language as he conceives Incarnation as identification between the pre-existent Word and the Word that becomes Human. Michael O'Sullivan comments that here Gadamer is moving away from the Greek idealism toward a greater appreciation for the connection between the word and the thought.

(Michael O'Sullivan, *The Incarnation of Language: Joyce, Proust and a Philosophy of the Flesh*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 12.)

38 Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 2.

39 Ibid.

40 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417.

41 Ibid.

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emphasizes the historically constituted meaning of the verbum and thus constitutes an essential critique of the Hegelian notion of the "Universal Spirit" by introducing the sense of reflections in philosophy. In his section on "Language and *Verbum*" in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer harps on this two-way referral between the history of philosophy and the *Verbum*. As Arthus notes, for Gadamer the doctrine of incarnation "is more than a mere metaphor".[42] For him, "the link between human language and the theological doctrine of incarnation, if taken seriously, cannot be a [mere] convenience of explanation for language theory."[43] Gadamer is heavily invested in his understanding of the incarnation of the Word and its implications for explicating the relationship between speech and thought and thus for hermeneutics.

Gadamer further builds on the world-disclosing function of language, that is, its character as the constituting and mediating principle of understanding and links it up with the principle of the Christian incarnation. Gadamer is utilizing the biblical understanding of Logos as the creative power of God. He notes,

> Creation once took place through the word of God. In this way, the early Fathers used the miracle of language to explain the un-Greek idea of the creation. But most important the actual redemptive act, the sending of the Son, the mystery of the incarnation, is described in St. John's prologue itself in terms of the word. Exegesis interprets the speaking of the word to be as miraculous as the incarnation of God.[44]

By linking the biblical idea of the Word as both the creative power of God and the

redemptive act of God, Gadamer enriches the understanding of Logos as the purposeful communicative speech and act of God. He observes that there exists a background of a shared world-disclosure between God and humanity, within the linguistic paradigm, that serves as the condition of possibility of the *telos* of understanding between the speaker (God) and hearer (Humanity).[45] He asserts, 'it must be emphasized that language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding."[46] The Word-event of the incarnation with all its redemptive significance is the birth of the Second Person of Trinity, which is essentially God speaking the Word to humanity toward a common understanding. Vanhoozer affirms this when he observes that we should follow a "distinctly Christian and theological, which is to say Trinitarian, approach to biblical interpretation that begins by recognizing God as a triune communicative agent and Scripture as the written locus of God's communicative action."[47] This communication by the Trinitarian God as the agent and the incarnation as the action has all the characteristics (analogically) of the human communication.

Gadamer, affirms the hypostatic union of the human and divine natures in the Word in principle but does not divulge into details. This is in accordance with his principle that the concept-speech process does not exhaust the truth meaning. He says,

> … the act of becoming is not the kind of becoming in which something turns into something else. Neither does it consist in separating one thing from the other (*kaf apokopen*), nor in lessening the inner word

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42 Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 2 citing Gadamer, Truth and Method, 421.

43 Ibid.

44 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418.

45 Ibid., 97.

46 Ibid., 446.

47 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2005), 31.

by its emergence into exteriority, nor in becoming something different, so that the inner word is used up.[48]

As Arthos notes, Gadamer's explication of the doctrine of the incarnation here is "rather cryptic and elliptical."[49] But, it is observable that Gadamer is emphasizing on the non-exhaustible mystery of the embodiment of the *verbum interius*. Arthos concludes,

> … the mediation between the material and spiritual realms … [insists] on the full humanity and the full divinity of the Logos. Here lies the inordinate power of the dogmatic model for hermeneutics, because the question of language is placed in juxtaposition to the person of the word. The nexus between humanity and divinity is not a reduction of some kind, as an overflow or surplus, as a tool or instrument, but contains the whole within it.[50]

When interpreted within the linguistic phenomenon, the union of the divine and the human natures of the Word in the Incarnation can be shown to uphold the mystery of this union as specified within the creedal delimiters: "*inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*" ….[51] Thus, Gadamer's ontological turn in hermeneutics avoids the reductionist tendencies in explaining the event of the incarnation.[52] Gadamer specifies that "… there is no point of view outside the experience of the world in language from which [language] could become an object."[53] Language in its world-disclosing function is both the condition

of possibility of experience and also its limit; but this does not signify any limit on the divine incarnation. Gadamer, thus, is opening new avenues to understand the mystery of "God Becoming Human" by establishing the analogy between linguistically constituted thought-speech pattern and the incarnation. This helps us to construe the theological significance of Jesus' incarnation as God's essential communication to humanity.

B. Verbum Interius

Gadamer had clarified that the human word is used only as a "counterpart to the theological problem of the Word, the *verbum dei*—i.e., the unity of God the Father and God the Son."[54] But the important thing for us, in this manner of conception, "is precisely that the mystery of this unity is reflected in the phenomenon of language."[55] For him,

> Language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it [*zur Sprache kommt*]. Not only is the world world insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originally human means at the same time that man's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic.[56]

Therefore, our appropriation of this inherent linguistic constitution of our being demands the recognition of the truth it contains.[57] Gadamer is using this as a basis for expounding the mystery of the Trinity through language.

Here, Gadamer is following the paradigm shift introduced by Humboldt. Humboldt had

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48   Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418.

49   Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 22.

50   Ibid.

51   https://carm.org/christianity/creeds-and-confessions/chalcedonian-creed-451-ad accessed on 06/01/2017.

52   Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 22.

53   Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 452.

54   Ibid.

55   Ibid., 443.

56   Ibid.

57   Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 81.

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posited the cognitive-semantic dimension of language, as he viewed language "not as a mere system of signs, as an objectifiable (intraworldly) entity, but as constitutive of the activity of thinking, as the very condition of possibility of this activity."[58] In other words, apart from language, there are no alternative categories though which reality can be revealed to us. Following this principle, Gadamer makes use of the traditional Augustinian concept of "verbum interius" in order to explicate the link between the Trinity and the incarnation as God's spoken Word. When he was asked about the factor that could be characterized as the "universal aspect of hermeneutics," he claimed that "it is consisted in the *verbum interius*."[59] Arthos mentions that, for Gadamer, Augustine's notion of *verbum interius* "is an extension of God's utterance, and of world history as a figural and narrative enactment that bespeaks the person of the Word."[60]

Though Gadamer did not approach this theme from a religious perspective, as Arthos observes, he did not link language to the incarnation and verbum interius as merely an example, and it indeed plays a constitutive role in his conception. He portrays the Trinitarian mystery as the "miracle of language." He says,

> The mystery of the Trinity is mirrored in the miracle of language insofar as the word that is true, because it says what the thing is, is nothing by itself and does not seek to be anything: *nihil de suo habens, sed totum de ilia scientia de qua nascitur*. It has its being in its revealing. Exactly the same thing is true of the mystery of the Trinity.[61]

As the word has its being in the process of

revealing a thing, the "inner word" has its being in the revealing of the mystery of the Trinity. He further remarks,

> … the important thing is not the earthly appearance of the Redeemer as such, but rather his complete divinity, his consubstantiality with God. To grasp the independent personal existence of Christ within this sameness of being is the task of theology. Here a human analogue—the mental word, the verbum intellectus—is helpful. This is more than a mere metaphor, for the human relationship between thought and speech corresponds, despite its imperfections, to the divine relationship of the Trinity. The inner mental word is just as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father.[62]

He uses the thought-speech relationship within the human realm in order to use the concept of *verbum intellectus* (mental word) as an analogue to explicate the Trinitarian relations. By referring back to his earlier thought-speech identification, he establishes the identification of the revealed Word as the Divine Word, the Second Person in the Trinity. Human mental process is the analogy Gadamer is using to explain this relationship. But, Gadamer is not emphasizing the psychological character of the "inner word" with its prelinguistic connotations, rather he is focusing on the process of utterance and their ontological identity. He says, "The inner word remains related to its possible utterance. While it is being conceived by the intellect, the subject matter is at the same time ordered toward being uttered …. Since a process of thinking through to the end is involved, we have to acknowledge a processual element in it."[63] This processual conception is very useful to relate the mystery of the inner-Trinitarian relation to the incarnation. By alluding to the Augustinian concept of the

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58 Ibid.

59 Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 1.

60 Ibid., 3.

61 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 419.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 420.

"eternal generation" of the Son, Gadamer uses the utterance (creation) of a human word as a cognitive-mental process in order to relate the ontological Trinity to the economic Trinity:

> Thus, we can see how the creation of the word came to be viewed as a true image of the Trinity. It is a true *generatio*, a true birth, even though, of course, there is no receptive part to go with a generating one. It is precisely the intellectual nature of the generation of the word, however, that is of decisive importance for its function as a theological model. The process of the divine persons and the process of thought really have something in common.[64]

While talking about the Trinitarian relations, it is apparent that Gadamer is exclusively talking about the Father-Son relations without mentioning the Third Person of the Trinity. Given that Gadamer's primary motive here not being theological and as his purpose was to relate the *verbum interius* of the Trinitarian relations to the Christian incarnation, it is understandable that he is basing his hermeneutical model on such an analogue.

Gadamer understands that the appropriation of the human thought-speech process does imply that it is possible to mistake temporality as entering into the relations of the divine persons. He highlights the essential difference between the divine inner relations and human mental process and hence the limitations of the analogy:

> The mystery of the Trinity, which the analogy with the inner word is supposed to illuminate, must ultimately remain incomprehensible in terms of human thought. If the whole of the divine mind is expressed in the divine Word, then the processual element in this word signifies something for which we basically have no analogy. Insofar as, in knowing itself, the

divine mind likewise knows all beings, the word of God is the word of the Spirit that knows and creates everything in one intuition (*intuitus*). The act of production disappears in the immediacy of divine omniscience.[65]

With the caveat that human mental process does not fully signify the inner-Trinitarian relations but only in an analogical way, Gadamer explains the mystery of the Trinity as being revealed in the event of the Incarnation: the Word that proceeds eternally from the thought of God has been "uttered" in speech, in the event of the incarnation. This linguistic manner of the conception of "God becoming human" does full justice to the mystery and the revealedness of God's communicative act. Let us proceed to understand the Atonement of Christ as a communicative act.

IV. ATONEMENT AS INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE JOY

A. Continuing Conversation

John Searle observed that, "[I]n a dialogue or a conversation, each speech act creates a space of possibilities of appropriate response speech acts. Just as a move in a game creates a space of possible and appropriate countermoves, so in a conversation, each speech act creates a space of possible and appropriate response speech acts."[66] When a word is spoken, it anticipates an appropriate response. And when such a dialogue happens in a sequence, "[t]he relationship between actions in sequence thus provides an interpretive resource for both participants … because each action in a

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64 Ibid., 421.

65 Ibid.

66 John R. Searle, *Consciousness and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 181.

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sequence inherently embodies and displays its producer's interpretation of the prior actions in the sequence."[67] Therefore, the act of atonement considered in tandem with the event of Christ's incarnation produces a semantic sequence, as a continuing conversation, in order to bring the full significance of "God becoming human" in Christ. As in the context of a dialogue "succession is interpreted as bringing into relationship,"[68] as a purposeful communication of God, God-becoming-human in Jesus Christ is an invitation to participate in the good news of "great joy" to all the people. Adam Neder affirms this notion saying, "Our *de jure* participation in Christ is ordered toward our *de facto* participation in him."[69] He further notes, "Salvation is not first of all a question posed to humanity. It is a truth proclaimed to humanity. But this truth itself poses a question that demands an answer from humanity."[70]

Commenting on Atonement, Adam Johnson remarks, "The invasion of our reality by God in the incarnation is so complete and decisive that there is no meaning or significance left to our own place within this history."[71] The meaning and significance of Christ's incarnation and atonement constitute the total meaning of human existence and demands sincere human response. Barth also highlights the importance of this communication by pointing to the Trinitarian essence of this mode of revelation: "God reveals himself in such a way

that as Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is one God."[72] Barth emphasizes the essential unity (*Einheit*) of God in the Economic Trinity: "In the incarnate, crucified, abandoned and exalted Son we do not know a God different from the Father whom he reveals, and in the work of the Spirit in the Church this revelation is not altered or augmented but verified and applied."[73] This revelatory act of God is purposeful and consequential as it invites us by enabling our participation through Christ. Johnson observes that Barth would contend that "Christ does not merely create the possibility that we might know him, as if the realization of this knowledge were the result of two actions ––Christ's act and then our response to it. … since this revelation has its origin in God's eternal wisdom and has our participation in this wisdom as its intrinsic goal or *telos*."[74] The Triune God's invitation through the revelatory sequence of the incarnation-atonement anticipates the *telos* of human response and participation.[75]

The linguistic paradigm does full justice by helping us to construe the whole significance of human existence as being constituted in comprehending and responding to God's communicative act in Christ. As Barth elaborates: "By entering into our time, God heals and restores our time in order to re-establish

67 Daniel Vanderveken and Susumu Kubo, *Essays in Speech Act Theory* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2002), 124.

68 Ibid.

69 Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry Into Karl Barth's **Church Dogmatics*** (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 46.

70 Ibid.

71 Adam J. Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 50.

72 Karl Barth, Thomas F. Torrance, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Church Dogmatics,* The Doctrine of Creation, Volume 1, Part 1 : The Work of Creation, *Church Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 348.

73 Ibid.

74 Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 50 citing Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 609.

75 Barthian conception would emphasize the Sovereignty of God under which human response is subsumed and hence eventually all human beings will respond to this invitation by God. However, if we have to account for Calvin's predestination, this invitation is being extended to those who have been predestined by God and hence would respond positively to God's continuing communication.

our fellowship with God."[76] This "decisive and objective invasion of God into our time is ordered towards the subjective realization and fulfilment of this reality in the form of union and fellowship with Christ."[77] Participation in and through Christ becomes the focal point of Barth. He says, "In this event God allows the world and humanity to take part in the history of the inner life of His Godhead, in the movement in which from and to all eternity He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore the one true God."[78] While Barth is emphatic about the unity of the Trinitarian Persons in the *ad extra*, he also talks about the real fellowship between the Creator and creature. He avers that human beings have "a share in the Word of God and therefore in God himself – a creaturely share in a creaturely manner, but nevertheless a real share."[79]

Barth conceives this human partnership with God as a "being by the side of God, the participation of man in the being and life of God, a willing of what he wills and a doing of what he does.[80] It will be a being not only as an object but as an active subject in the fellowship of God."[81] Again without blurring the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity, Barth conceives the possibility of an active human fellowship of with God. Barth approaches this idea through the Pauline notion of *koinonia*, which he defines as "a relationship between two persons in which these are brought into perfect mutual coordination within the framework of a definite order, yet with no destruction of their two-sided identity

and particularity, but rather in its confirmation and expression."[82] Johnson notes that Barth is arguing that God establishes *koinonia* between Christ and the believer by bringing them into coordination with one another within the history of the covenant.[83] Barth also draws from Paul's description that the Spirit is the agent who establishes this relationship between Christ and the believer. Thus, God's continuing conversation in the incarnation-atonement sequence is an earnest invitation of God to humanity for a fuller participation of God's communion.

B. Experience of the 'Thou' and 'S/he'

Human experiences are vital for Gadamerian hermeneutics. However, the experience contemplated by Gadamer's argument is completely different from the instrumental-pragmatic experience of the lifeworld.[84] It is the "experience of the Thou" in a relational context.[85] Gadamer emphasizes that what is specific to this experience is that "the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us."[86] Therefore, the I-Thou relation "cannot consist in a perception of the external world, but rather in the understanding of others by interacting with them."[87] If we apply this principle to God's purposeful communication in the redemptive act of Christ's atonement, this I-Thou relational matrix could help us to understand the significance of atonement as an invitation for intimate communion with God. As Johnson notes, Barth conceives the I-Thou relationship

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76 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 609.

77 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 346.

78 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 215.

79 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 177.

80 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 535.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 50.

84 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 97.

85 Ibid.

86 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.

87 Ibid.

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as constituting "a genuine sharing, a genuine fellowship that God seeks with us, and therefore a fellowship and sharing to which we are called and to which we must respond (although one in which God clearly and necessarily retains the priority and initiative)."[88] Gadamer states, "Consequently, the I can be constituted as such only against a 'thou,' for 'thou is the he [sic] facing the I,' that is, 'an object . . . whose essence consists exclusively in being a subject.'"[89] By negating the notion of a strict subject-object relationships within human interactions, Gadamer is emphasizing the subject-subject relationship between the I and thou. He is using his hermeneutical observations to conclude that conversations are not possible in an objectified context, but only within a relational context. He further notes that the thou "is also a non-I, but in a different sphere, in the sphere where mutual influence results in common action."[90] The negation of I as non-I is also encountered within such a dialogical relation where I and thou can mutually participate as in a collective action. While such an analogy has its own limitations in its application to God, the main crux of this conception is to emphasize the partnership of humanity with God in the conversation of the incarnation-atonement sequence.

God does not see us as objects but as subjects, who are equal partners in this conversation of eternal redemptive significance.[91] When construed in such a linguistic fashion, we are able to understand the significance of Christ's atonement as a participation in the joy of God's salvation, because we are not mere objects,

rather subjects involved in this collective action of the God-initiated redemptive sequence. This can be better clarified through a doxological understanding. Westminster Catechism states that humanity's "chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever."[92] We are "doxological creatures", who can find true joy and meaning in life by being active participants in God's conversation with us through Christ.[93] When we relate to God in an I-Thou relation, we negate our Ego as non-I and experience God through "this redemptive gratitude [which is] the ultimate telos of joy."[94] Charles Mathewes notes, "The joyful act of praising God—a thankfulness flowing almost automatically from recognition of God's gifts—is the central action of the human, the self-transcending act in which we begin to participate in our fullest flourishing."[95] Joy is also a responsive act that is expressed through exaltation and thankfulness, facilitating one into an "extrasubjective relationship."[96]

However, this relationship does not stop with mere I-Thou axis. It also includes the "third person". Lafont notes, "Once this subject-subject relation is produced through the counterposing of the first and second person, the character of the third person is transformed."[97] Gadamer observes, "[T]he he [sic] not only consists in a non-I, but equally in a non-thou; and it is, therefore, not only opposed to one of them but

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88 Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation*, 50.

89 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 204.

90 Ibid.

91 However, this aspect of being "equal partners" with God has to be understood within the overall relation of Creator-creature dimension. God deigns to make us as equal partners through the Incarnation in flesh.

92 Charles Mathewes, "Toward a Theology of Joy" in Miroslav Volf, *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, ed. Justin E. Crisp (Fortress Press, 2015), 63.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 65.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid. 66.

97 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, 48.

to both."[98] The I-Thou relationship between an individual and God as if in a vertical plane also includes one's fellow beings in the horizontal plane. Lafont elaborates:

> Only by being elevated to the status of the common object of the first two persons does the third achieve its character of the object. In this way, it becomes an axis of a complementary perspective irreducible to the other: namely, the subject-object perspective. The I-thou perspective constitutes the sphere "where mutual influence results in common action"— that is, the social sphere centered in the subject-subject relation. The I/thou-he perspective constitutes "the sphere of all beings," the whole of everything the subjects can talk about.[99]

While the I-Thou-S/he relationship matrix enables the third person to attain an objective state, a domain of focus for the excessive joy that results from an individual's subject-subject relationship with God, within the social sphere, the third person becomes the subject (thou) for the human individual as in a subject-subject relationship. Thus, our participation in God's redemptive conversation in the incarnation-atonement actively includes the whole of humanity constituting the "the sphere of all beings". Mathewes sums it up as he says, "We [all] are called to become participants in the endless joyful round of love that is the Trinity, learning to receive rightly the proleptic gifts of eschatological joy today."[100] This joy is indeed the proleptic joy that will be consummated in God's eschaton.

Gadamer is locating the communal significance of the incarnation-atonement sequence within the ecclesiastical community, especially in its kerygma and sacrament. He says, "The proclamation of salvation, the content of the Christian gospel, is itself an event that takes place in sacrament and preaching, and yet it expresses only what took place in Christ's redemptive act. Hence it is one word that is proclaimed ever anew in preaching, point[ing] to the multiplicity of its proclamation."[101] These multiple appearances of the one Logos in the world is again an accommodation to the historically constituted human consciousness. He says, "It is true that the divine Word is one unique word that came into the world in the form of the Redeemer; but insofar as it remains an event …there is an essential connection between the unity of the divine Word and its appearance in the church."[102] Therefore, the participation of humanity with the Triune God, modelled in the manner of the inner-Trinitarian relations, is the *telos* of the ecclesial community. The liturgies of the Christian churches, the *kerygma* and sacrament, are all God's invitation to participate in this continuing conversation of God's redemptive act in Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

The phrase "the Word became flesh" is the most profound statement in the Bible, that even after two millenniums of contemplation on this mystery of "God becoming human," it continues to baffle the human mind. While for a period of time, the Enlightenment enthronement of "absolute Reason" attempted to discredit the mystery of this phenomenon through its naturalistic conception, we find an ally in the "linguistic turn" of the philosophy of language tradition. By identifying the linguistically-

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98 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 204.

99 Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy,* 48.

100 Mathewes, "Toward a Theology of Joy" in Volf, *Joy and Human Flourishing*, 65.

101 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 425.

102 Ibid.

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constituted consciousness of humanity, the linguistic turn disabused the notion of transcendental reason. Also, it rejected the Kantian notion of perceiving language as a mere tool for designating the phenomenal world. It was made clear that apart from linguistic categories, there are no alternatives to construe and also to relate to one's outside-world. One of the major highlights of the linguistic turn apart from detranscendantalizing reason is the identification of thought/concept with language/speech. By denying the notion of any prelinguistic categories that exist apart from language, the very possibility of a conceptual ability was thoroughly grounded in the linguistic capability of humans. Gadamer also established the identity between the "mental word" (thought) and the "uttered word" (speech). Thus, the rejection of the view that limits language as mere tools of representation and the identification of thought-speech became the quintessential facets of the linguistic turn. This helped in establishing language as constitutive of thought that was traditionally attributed to consciousness. Thus, human consciousness itself was brought within the purview of language.

But above all, it is Gadamer's use of the Christian notion of the incarnation that seals the relevance of a linguistic conception of God's revelation. Gadamer conceives the thought-speech identification as "revelation" and finds great potential in the concept of the Christian incarnation as a paradigm to explicate this identification. He conceives the embodiment of the Logos as a bold statement of God that overcomes the spiritual-material divide within human finitude as God is not wary of dealing with history, by uttering the Word in the "flesh". Thus, the revelation of the transcendent-immanent God in the incarnation is essentially

God's communication. Gadamer's conception of linguistic categories to understand the incarnation is followed by his use of the Trinitarian relations (especially the Father-Son relationship) to explicate the Logos as "Spoken Word". He uses the Augustinian concept of *Verbum interius*, that was used to explicate the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. He relates it to the mental process of forming a thought in the mind and uttering it as an analogy to explain the event of incarnation. The mental Word that proceeds from the Father in eternity is also the "uttered Word" in the incarnation. Thus, he identifies the Second Person of the Trinity to the revealed Word in the person of Jesus Christ. Though he is cautious about the limitations of using a human concept (mental process) to explain the divine mystery, he is able to explain the mystery of the embodied Logos. Without delving into details on the nature of the union of the divine and human natures in the Incarnation, he is appealing to the limits of human linguistic consciousness that cannot exhaust the divine mystery. However, we should note that there is a "preunderstanding" of Gadamer's conceptual preference of linguistic phenomenon over the event of incarnation as he draws inference from the latter to establish the ontological unity of speech and thought. Also, his understanding of inner divine relations is construed primarily as a binity conception as the Spirit seldom figures in the generation and procession of the Word.

Yet, it can be agreed upon that Gadamer, even without a theological intent, has done a commendable job in explicating the event of the incarnation through the linguistic aspects of thought-speech identification and mental process. This analogue helps us to conceive the redemptive act of God in the incarnation as a communicative act. Further,

through the use of the speech-act, we are able to conceive the Atonement of Christ as a continuing conversation of God, that invites us to a fuller communion with the Triune God. This participation becomes the *telos* of God's communication in the incarnation-atonement sequence. And, by rightly understanding the aspect of human experience that is vital for all our hermeneutical endeavours within the I-Thou-S/he matrix, we can understand God's communication in the continuing conversation of Christ's atonement as an invitation to participate in the joy of communion with God in Christ. The doxological nature of our constitution only reiterates this need for a proper response to God's redemptive communication, so as to participate in the proleptic joy of fellowshipping with God.

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