Proposal for Senior Honors Thesis

HONS 497 Senior Honors Thesis   **Credits** 2 Credits (2 Credits Minimum)

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Thesis Title: "A Cohesive Response to the Problem of Language in the Doctrine of God: A Phenomenological Approach."
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Expected date of Graduation: May 2019

I.   Provide goals and brief description of your project or research.

II. Outline your methodology. **Please be specific**. How does this achieve your goals and how reliable is it?

III. Explain in what sense your project is original, unique, or beyond normal senior expectations. How does it relate to current knowledge in the discipline?

IV. Include a substantive annotated bibliography of similar or related work.

V.   Provide a statement of progress to date and list the research methods coursework completed.

Department Chair Approval

- This student's performance in his/her major field is acceptable.
- He/she has completed the requisite research methods coursework for the research to be pursued.
- I understand that he/she plans to graduate with Honors.

_____
Department Chair (signature)

Research Advisor Approval

I have read and support this proposal: _____
Primary Advisor (signature)

I have read and support this proposal: _____
Secondary Advisor (signature)

I.   Project Description

a. Thesis Introduction

"Your thoughts concerning God are all too human," wrote Martin Luther to Erasmus of Rotterdam in his *Bondage of the Will*.[1] Evocatively, Luther's complaint against Erasmus had much to do with understanding and describing the transcendent God of Scripture within the limitations of the human mind. For centuries, various thinkers and theologians have also tried to delineate the Doctrine of God (who or what is God) in a way that was not "all too human," and yet, that all humans could understand. Today, however, sympathizers of modern philosophical trends—such as feminism, ecocriticism, and others—have emphatically argued that theologians must purge the Doctrine of God from patriarchal and hierarchical metaphors. According to these currents, theologians must replace traditional terminology used to describe God with language that is more in tune with the ethos of contemporary society.[2] Opposing this reasoning, other more conservative trends argue that to define God in terms not employed in Scripture perverts any sound understanding of God and his way of relating to human beings.[3] In the midst of these arguments, many fundamental questions arise: Is our present language for the Doctrine of God enough to describe who or what God is? What type of approach to language should theologians adopt when speaking about God?

Answering these questions and other modern theological concerns, this project develops an approach to language based upon the way in which the Biblical authors use their words to describe the special revelation of God. In this Honors Thesis, I argue that the method employed by the writers of Scripture when they speak and theorize about God relies upon a theophanic (interpersonal), metaphoric, and paradoxical use of language.[4] While modern scholars have emphasized one or two of these approaches, no one has previously noted how these three ways of utilizing language emerge from the biblical text and, hauntingly, complement each other to provide a response to the problem of language in theology. Hence, this project proposes a fresh response to the problem of language in the Doctrine of God by stressing the use of theophanic, metaphoric, and paradoxical language that, according to the Bible, must shape all theological discourse.

b. Literary Background

In recent decades, a plethora of voices has risen to defend new approaches to the Doctrine of God that favor, amongst other things, anthropological (human centered), mystical (experience centered), and therapeutic (healing centered) interpretations that ultimately put into question the way in which language functions to describe God. For example, according to scholar Gordon D. Kaufman in his book *The Theological Imagination*, theology is merely "human work…. done by humans for human purposes."[5] To Kaufman, God as a personal entity does not involve himself in the process of making theology. Thus, the task of the theologian becomes an anthropological one; the study of how humanity has come to socially construct its understanding of God. In Kaufman's theology, the names and theories that theologians assign to God are simply speculations of the incomprehensibility of God.

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[1] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2012), 87.

[2] Ann E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 51.

[3] Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'" in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Language of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 6.

[4] See the section of this document titled "Thesis and Research Goals" for an explanation of these terms.

[5] Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 263.

Other theologians, rather distancing themselves from Kaufman's assertions, embody a more mystical approach to language. Systematic theologian John Hick, for example, suggests in *Who or What is God?* that in seeking to describe God, theologians should first acknowledge the methods of cognition described in mystical theology.[6] According to the method of mystical theology, humans can only access knowledge of God through a mystical contemplative encounter with the divine. Here, what constitutes the contemplative encounter is meditation (a type of prayer where the believer avoids rational thought in order to experience spiritual transcendence) and liturgy (collective church practices such as communion and the mass). Thus, to speak of God, the theologian must first seek to actively and intentionally initiate a contemplative meditation that ultimately provides true knowledge of God.[7] Given the emphasis placed on God's identity as a mystery, theologians who favor mysticism such as John Hick or Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite often participate in an "apophatic" approach to language. Commonly known as apophaticism or negative theology, apophatic theology is the study of God that emphasizes God's transcendence by speaking of the divine only through negations. Phrases such as "God is *not* cognizable" or "God is a *not* finite" are part of apophatic theology because they speak of God by saying what God is not. For apophaticism, the cataphatic approach (i. e. speaking through affirmations) is insufficient to describe God successfully.[8]

Addressing an entirely different view of language, scholars such as Rui Manuel Grácio das Neves in *Utopia y Resistencia* argue that, in the face God's transcendence, one must use theological language as a poetic exercise or linguistic therapy to express the believer's devotion and relationship with God.[9] Here, the metaphor serves as a tool to express human emotions and preoccupations without much concern for the nature of God's special revelation. Hence, the metaphor serves human purposes of self-expression rather than yielding knowledge about particulars aspects of God that lie beyond the human experience.

Interestingly, in all these different models, theology becomes a confined linguistic reflection (whether positive or negative) on the religious thoughts used by human beings to describe the great mystery of God. Even though these theologies present interesting analyses on the role of language in theology, in my project I argue that these various approaches remain incomplete when analyzed in light of Scripture.

c. **Thesis and Research Goals**

Amongst other things, this project proves itself different from other works on the Doctrine of God by not proposing a response centered on a merely anthropological (Kaufman), mystical (Hick), or therapeutic (Grácio das Neves) approach to language. Rather, from what I observe in Scriptures, I argue that all theological formulations should spring from the threefold realization that theological language exists within a theophanic, metaphorical, and paradoxical spectrum.

Responding to Kaufman's anthropological argument, my paper emphasizes the theophanic (meaning, "showing of God") interaction between the believer and the divine that according to the Bible must precede theological discourse. In this section of my paper, the theophanic refers to an interaction or showing of God initiated by God himself. Contrary to the assertions often shaping mystical theology, in my model, God initiates the interpersonal encounter and not humanity.

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[6] John Hick, *Who or What is God? And Other Formulations* (New York: Seabury Books, 2009).

[7] Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita, "Teología Mística" in *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2007).

[8] Moisés Maimónides, *Guía de los Descarriados: Tratado del Conocimiento de Dios* (México D. F.: Editorial Orión, 1947).

[9] Rui Manuel Grácio das Neves, *Utopía y Resistencia: Hacia Una Teopoética de la Liberación* (Salamanca, SP: Editorial San Esteban, 1994).

Consequently, this theophanic approach refers to the idea that in the Biblical tradition, as Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit comment in *Idolatry*, all speech springs from the human encounter with the divine phenomenon.[10] Situating the observations of Halbertal and Margalit on the biblical text in conversation with the philosophical thought of theologian Jean-Luc Marion in *God Without Being*, I suggest that all theological formulations must start by beholding the revealed Word of God in Jesus Christ, icon and image[11] of the divine, as articulated through the Scriptures and refined through daily spirituality.[12]

Furthermore, elaborating on the thought of Brian C. Howell in his book *In the Eyes of God* and on Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology*, I respond to Grácio das Neves's therapeutic approach to the language of theology in *Utopia y Resistencia* by stressing the nature of metaphors in the biblical text.[13] Contrary to Grácio das Neves, I do not see theology as an exercise in the religious imagination that renders all theological discourse as simple allegories used for the sake of personal healing or liberation. Rather, based on what the Biblical text suggests, I argue that the language of systematic theology must constantly thrive from a metaphorical approach to the Doctrine of God that despite taking hold of metaphors and images, speaks truth about God (Brian C. Howell). This section of my Honors Thesis addressees the importance of metaphorical language and considers the fact that the biblical tradition also employs metaphors and anthropomorphisms to describe (not conscribe) God and his self-revelation.

Lastly, to balance the theophanic and metaphoric uses of language, I conclude my paper by asserting that the language of theology must forever exist within the paradox of God's incognizable transcendence and the knowability of his revelation. In this context, parting from the formulations of John Thompson in *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, I argue that theological affirmations must embody a never-ending paradox that articulates the vexation of the human mind in trying to understand the divine.[14] Thus, differing from the apophatic mystical tradition that sees God as an incognizable distant entity accessed only through contemplation, I discuss that the mind indeed can grasp some limited knowledge about the nature of God despite not scrutinizing the details of God's divine self.

II.   Methodology[15]

To create a model that addresses a sound approach to the language used for the Doctrine of God, this investigation first looks at various scholarly sources that deal with the problem of language in theology. In this section, I gather scholarly data from various theologians who theorize on the role of language, and I organize them according to their different approaches.

Secondly, I identify biblical passages where the authors of Scripture explicitly use language to describe God after having a theophanic encounter with the Godhead. For this section, I particularly

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[10] Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[11] Colossians 1:15.

[12] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors Texte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[13] Brian C. Howell, *In the Eyes of God: A Metaphorical Approach to Biblical Anthropomorphic Language* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2014). See also Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

[14] John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[15] The following methodology is an adaptation of Millard J. Erickson and Mike Stallard's method for systematic theology. See Millard J. Erickson, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). See also Mike Stallard, "A Proposal for Theological Method: Systematic Theology as Model Building," *Scribd*, accessed July 30, 2018, https://www.scribd.com/document/269921907/A-PROPOSAL-FOR-THEOLOGICAL-METHOD-SYSTEMATIC-THEOLOGY-AS-MODEL-BUILDING-by-Mike-Stallard.

study the language employed by the biblical authors to describe the theophanies of God (i. e. physical appearances of the divine). Ergo, I center my analysis of the language used by the biblical text on four specific passages that address a distinct approach to the divine and, interestingly, set up a pattern for discourse about God in the rest of the Bible. These passages are Gen. 16:13-14; Ex. 3:13-15; Job 42:1-6; and Lk. 1:46-55.

Thirdly, I analyze and examine how the biblical writers use language to speak of God in a theophanic, metaphoric, and paradoxical way in these four chosen texts. Here I note the similarities and differences in the attitudes that shape how the biblical writers approach the mystery of God.

Fourthly, in light of my analysis of the approach to language exemplified in the biblical text and modern theology, I move on to build my own model to make assertions in the Doctrine of God. Then, I examine my new model under the three-folded criteria of consistency, coherence, and comprehensiveness in order to validate these observations. At this point, a thoroughgoing assessment of my model should deem my project bereft of internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Thus, I seek to explain a sound approach to the Doctrine of God that recognizes the observations of the biblical text while still acknowledging the criticism of various modern theological schools of thought. At this point, my model must stand as a carefully crafted unity, clearly defined and applied to the scope of modern conversations on the Doctrine of God.

III. How My Project Is Original, Unique, or Beyond Normal Expectation

My project goes beyond average senior expectations by expanding on research I have completed over the past two years throughout several courses in the areas of theology and English literature. In addition, training in literary criticism and biblical hermeneutics allows me to see the problem of language in theology from an interdisciplinary perspective. Hence, my research explores the implications of creating a different approach to the language of theology, as I am aware of what critical scholars have observed about language not only in biblical theology, but also in modern literary schools of criticism such as feminism, eco-feminism, race theory, and mysticism. In addition, my paper engages with various theologians who write on the Doctrine of God in five languages: English, Spanish, French, Hebrew, and koine Greek. My academic preparation in these languages, in addition to the fact that I am a fluent speaker of Spanish and English, allows me to approach the thesis of my project from an interlinguistic perspective beyond the limitations of an anglophone American context.

IV. Annotated Bibliography

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. "Exchanging God for 'No Gods.'" *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Language of Feminism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.

In an essay that considers the challenges of twentieth-century feminist discourse, Elizabeth Achtemeier argues that the Bible intentionally favors the use of certain masculine anthropocentric metaphors to speak of God. In her interpretation of Scripture, the Bible does not invite human beings to describe God with language that changes at human whim. Rather, God chooses to self-manifest in five anthropocentric, male, archetypal metaphors: King, Father, Judge, Husband, and Master. To Achtemeier, the text of Scripture is consistent in favoring these five metaphors to display particular aspects of who God is and how "He" relates to his people. In the context of my thesis, I engage with Achtemeier's understanding of the language of Scripture in the first step of my methodology in order to see the promises and perils of her approach to language in relation to what other scholars have commented on Scripture.

Botella Cubells, Vicente. *Dios Escribe y se Escribe con Trazo Humano: Cristología Fundamental.* Salamanca, SP: Editorial San Esteban, 2002.

In *Dios Escribe y se Escribe con Trazo Humano*, Vicente Botella Cubells discusses the limitations of the first apostles in describing their experience with the incarnate Christ through human language. At the core of his book, Botella Cubells argues that the apostles favored the use of Old Testament metaphors to describe their understanding of Jesus, whom they saw as the incarnate manifestation of God. In addition, he notes a shift from the narrative-based language of the Old Testament to a more conceptual and philosophical understanding of God in the New Testament. In the context of my thesis, I consider the value of Botella Cubells's formulations in the first step of my methodology. The work of Botella Cubells proves itself profitable to my thesis by expanding my understanding of how scholars approach the language that the NT (specifically) uses to express the nature of God.

Dahlill, Laura E. "Addressing God with Names of Earth." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43 (2016).

Laura E. Dahlill's article, "Addressing God with Names of Earth," delineates various issues with the traditional male-anthropocentric discourse of systematic theology. According to Dahlill, theologians should address God as "Mother Earth" in order to vindicate the Godhead's relationship with females and the created world. For Dahlill, defining God in male-human terms ostracizes the female reader and potentially ignores God's care and self-identification with the created world. For my project, I engage with Dahlill's argumentation in the first step of methodology to see how a deep concern for creation and the female reader should or should not affect a person's language about God.

Grácio das Neves, Rui Manuel. *Utopía y Resistencia: Hacia Una Teopoética de la Liberación.* Salamanca, SP: Editorial San Esteban, 1994.

In his introduction to *Utopía y Resistencia*, Rui Manuel Grácio das Neves argues in favor of a poetical and therapeutic use of language that makes the believer's understanding of God more concrete and approachable. In adopting poetry as an alternative method of theological discourse, Grácio das Neves makes a theology that is more accessible for the marginalized and oppressed within society. Thus, as he explains, poetry becomes the most relevant epistemic tool to explain God and access the daily religious experience of the marginalized. Contrary to other modes of writing theology, Grácio das Neves bases his approach to language on the concrete experience of the individual in the world and the multiplicity of meaning found in poetry. Amongst other things, I find Grácio das Neves's comments useful to my thesis in that they express a particular way of looking at the metaphors of Scripture. I analyze Grácio das Neves's thought in the first step of my methodology in order to see the manner in which he proposes a modern response to the problem of language in theology.

Jones, Major J. *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought.* Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987.

At the core of *The Color of God*, Major J. Jones develops a systematic approach to the Doctrine of God in light the African American experience. Furthermore, his book raises questions about the nature of the metaphors that scholars often employ to describe God. To Jones, metaphors are not canonical; rather, theologians filter them through the lenses of their cultural experience. Thus, parting from this understanding of theological metaphors, Jones views the language of theology as a paradoxical exercise that seeks to vindicate the language of Scripture while still acknowledging the nuances of one's worldview. Consequently, I engage with Jones's understanding of language in the first step of my thesis to see the manner in which his approach vindicates or denies my understanding of the theophanic, metaphoric, and paradoxical use of language in theology.

Kaufman, Gordon D. *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.

Gordon Kaufmann's *The Theological Imagination* deals with the Doctrine of God from an anthropological approach that sees divine phenomena as alien to the process of doing theology. As the title of the book suggests, Kaufman sees theology as a form of critical imagination that the scholar systematically uses to create a concept of God within society. In this context, modern theologians have the responsibility to study the concept of God critically in order to see how different historical circumstances shape people's understanding of God. To Kaufman, a human construct that yields little to no knowledge about the truth of who or what God is. In my project, I engage with Kaufman's thoughts in order to see the logical consequences of denying the testimony of Scripture or denying the existence of perceptible supernatural phenomena.

Marion, Jean Luc. *God Without Being: Hors* Texte. Translated by Thomas E. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

As one of the most emblematic works of modern philosophical theology, Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being* elaborates on the act of seeking to understand God from the limitations of the human mind. According to Marion, an encounter between the human and the divine is what ultimately yields true knowledge of God. In his book, Marion discusses the limitations of language and develops what he considers the right approach to the language of the Doctrine of God. Interestingly, while still acknowledging the limitations of human cognition, his book uses the theophanic vocabulary of Scripture in order to describe the encounter with the divine that yields knowledge about God. Marion's book stands as a compelling source that elucidates how to understand the theophanic revelations of Scripture in a philosophical context.

Martin, Teodoro H., trans. *Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita: Obras Completas.* Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2007.

In his introduction to the 2007 Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos edition of the complete works of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, Teodoro H. Martin concisely lays out Pseudo-Dionysius's understanding of the Doctrine of God in the context of the mystical tradition and negative theology. For Martin, Dionysius embodies a strong apophaticism, which renders God fully incognizable. This emphasis on God's incognoscibility deems language totally futile in asserting truth about the divine. Ergo, elaborating upon the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Martin argues for an apophatic approach to language—here language becomes negative, allowing the believer and theologian to speak of God only through manner of denial. Martin's delineation of the Aeropagite's views breaks down an entirely different framework to understand the language and purpose of theology. Martin's conceptualizations, amongst other things, elucidates the limitations of language when coming to understand the greatness of God.

V. Statement of Progress to Date

Currently, I find myself at the second step of my methodology: identifying and analyzing how the biblical text responds to the problem of language. However, to limit the scope of my engagement with the biblical text, my thesis focuses on the texts that directly deal with the paradox of attempting to explain God through human language. In this step, I center on the theophanies of Hagar (Gen. 16:13-14), Moses (Ex. 3:13-15), Job (Job 42:1-6), and Mary (Lk. 1:46-55), given the these are some of the few passages of Scripture where the narratives express direct concern with the limitations of human language in understanding God is and his relation to humanity.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that in the past I also have completed several papers on the Doctrine of God and the problem of language in theology. For RELT 325—*Theology I,* I

explored the presuppositions often imbedded in the language that theologians use to describe the Trinity in a twelve-page paper titled "The Trinity and Semantics: The Relationship between Trinitarian Language and Assumptions on Divine Ontology." For HONS 415—*Thinking Theologically*, I wrote a paper that explored the relation between the biblical text and the language of negations (i. e. apophatic theology) of St. John of the Cross, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, and Moses Maimonides. Consequently, I also completed a paper for RELH 316—*Church History I* on the historical influences that led to the rise of a negative approach to the language of theology in the late fifth century. Moreover, I am currently involved in an advanced Old Testament course that is aiding to my understanding of the way in which the ancient Hebrew culture of the biblical writers informed their understanding of God. In addition, I am also taking a course on medieval literature where I am exploring the language for the Doctrine of God in the literature of mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich.

The following step of my project is to see how the biblical text elucidates my approach to the language of theology in order to create a model. For this section, I intend to reshape and reorient some of the various observations I made in previous papers where I dealt with the Doctrine of God and the Problem of Language.