

Apophaticism as the Ultimate Way of Reaching Out Towards the Divine

Dionysus the Areopagite identified two main ways of speaking about God: cataphatic and apophatic. *Via positiva* tries to positively indicate what God is, even if what is being said is significantly limited. *Via negativa* is a way of speaking about God through negative claims, attempting to describe God by what He is not. Although the cataphatic way provides us with some vague account of God, it is apophaticism that can be said to be the ultimate way of reaching out towards the Divine.

In the Bible, we can easily find the use of cataphatic language: “[...] God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:4-6, ESV) Aquinas maintained that we can speak about the Divine in positive terms by analogies of attribution and proper proportion. The former states that we can say something about the author from the product he has created and the latter that there are certain qualities in the world, such as goodness, and God is their source but possesses these qualities most perfectly. A. E. McGrath explains these ways of speaking about God by writing that “There is a likeness or correspondence between God and His creation, which allows the latter to act as a signpost to God.”¹ What we say through *via positiva* may be somewhat positively indicative of the Divine. We can, then, speak of God being good, at the same time bearing in mind the profound limits of our language and inadequacy of human reason.

Via positiva may allow us to attempt to speak about God in a restricted manner, while still acting as a guide towards the Absolute. However, it is the apophatic way that is able to fill the gap in our non-understanding of the Divine. As V. Lossky remarks: “The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is of His very nature unknowable, is the second [apophatic way].”² Additionally, he asserts that the beginning of theology was the event of the Incarnation, for it revealed the antinomic God, so the One which is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in creation. Because of this, theology must be apophatic. Mystics such as Meister Eckhart often use apophaticism in their writings: “One is the negation of the negation and a denial of the denial,” emphasising the idea that the Divine is ineffable and beyond names. Any attempt of description imposes limits on God, but He is above them. God is not good; He is beyond goodness. With persistent negation there comes affirmation of the most important characteristic of God: He cannot be grasped by the severely limited human intellect and tools of language. As stated in Psalm 145:3 (ESV): “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.”

Some may say that apophaticism reduces God to nothing, as advocates of *via negativa* argue that no positive linguistic account is suitable for capturing Him. But God can, in fact, be spoken of as ‘Nothing’; not because He is less than anything, but because He is much more than everything. It is the dialectical relation of being and non-being that produces the final synthesis of the Absolute, in which every contradiction is finally sublated. That conflicting relation can be appropriately emphasised only by calling the Divine ‘Nothing’. “[...] He is not any of

¹ Alister E. McGrath - Christian Theology: An Introduction (p. 166)

² Vladimir Lossky - The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church (Chapter 2)

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existing things, nor is He known in any one of existing things. And He is all in all, and nothing in none,”³ as Dionysus the Areopagite writes. When God is described as ‘Nothing’, as a total negation of everything that is, it is emphasised that He is beyond it. Apophaticism escapes identifying God with the imperfect material in order to stress His simplicity, immutability, and supreme perfection. In the end, *via negativa* is quintessential in attempting to know God: “In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him [...] It is by *unknowing* that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge.”⁴ Seemingly paradoxically, apophaticism gives us quite an extensive insight into the Absolute and allows us to get to know God in a non-conceptual and unconstrained manner.

Some may also worry that by stripping God of descriptions we might lose the essential link between Him and humanity. However, apophaticism brings humans intimately close to the Divine, as there is no stark confinement pre-set by descriptions, and forces them into embracing radical openness towards God. It establishes a profound connection with the Divine, for the true knowledge of God is not propositional or conceptual, but rather far beyond human reason and given in the experience of God Himself, namely in *theosis* (θέωσις) or divinisation, understood as communion, illumination of understanding, and freedom from captivity. R. Williams commented on the work of V. Lossky in the following words: “In what way... is apophysis not the same as the mystical ascent?...”⁵ Apophaticism breaks the chains of the extreme fixation on reason, allowing for a deeper mystical knowledge of the Absolute and intense phenomenological involvement with It.

Although the cataphatic way offers us an intuitive way of referring to God, it is immensely limited due to a profound lack in human language and intellectual capacity. It can aim to guide us towards the Absolute and be somewhat indicative of Its nature. However, the endmost completion of theological discourse and religious experience is *via negativa*, for no positive utterance is competent enough to encapsulate the nature of the Divine. As reflected in the hymn composed by D. Bortniansky to the text of M. Kheraskov: “How glorious our Lord is in Zion, the tongue can not express.” *Via negativa* unravels the mystical understanding of God and allows for a direct encounter with Him, breaking the restrictions of reason and enabling humans to get exposed to the Absolute with radical openness. Because of this, apophaticism is the ultimate way of reaching out towards the Divine.

Word count: 982

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⁵ Rowen Williams - Lossky, *Via Negativa*, and the Foundations of Theology

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