

On Orthodox Apophatic Theology

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According to Lossky, Apophatic theology “constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church” (*Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 26). The apophatic approach is most perfectly expressed by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite who wrote his *Mystical Theology* at the end of the fifth century. This apophatic approach to theology utilized so effectively by Dionysius involves speaking of God through negation. As St. Augustine said, “God is He Whom we know best in not knowing Him.” As Lossky adds, “It is He about Whom we have no knowledge unless it be to know how we do not know Him” (*Orthodox Theology*, 23). Thus it is recognized that human thought breakdowns before the radical transcendence of God. As St. John the Theologian writes in his First Epistle, “No one has ever seen God” (4:12). Likewise St. Paul states, “God alone possesses immortality. He resides in inaccessible light; no man has seen Him or can see Him” (1 Tim 6:16).

This apophysis of Eastern theology was not borrowed from the philosophers. Whereas for the philosophers, “cosmogony coincided with theogony,” for Christians, there is a radical separation between the living God (the Trinity) and the created world. As Lossky explains, “The Fathers have used the philosophical technique of negation in order to posit the transcendence, absolute this time, of the living God” (*ibid*, 24). Orthodox apophatic theology is not an absorption of oneself into the intellect. It is rather “a prostration before the ungraspable, unobjectifiable and the unknowable. He is not only persona but is also ‘the plenitude of personal existence’” (*In the Image and Likeness of God*, 24).

Vladimir Lossky explains apophatic theology this way, “The negative way of the knowledge of God is an ascendant undertaking of the mind that progressively eliminates all positive attributes of the object it wishes to attain, in order to culminate finally in a kind of apprehension by supreme ignorance of Him who cannot be an object of knowledge” (*ibid*, 13). It can be further described as the failure of the mind when faced with that which is beyond conception. It can be understood as a result from the fact that our minds lack correspondence with the reality they attempt to attain or because this reality surpasses the limits of our understanding (*ibid*, 13). The end or goal of this approach is that the ignorance of what God is in His inaccessible nature, is imparted to us. This mystical knowledge is far superior to what can be understood through our intellect (*ibid*, 13). This “learned ignorance” is experienced by the iconographer as well as the theologian. Both are dependent on the central fact of Christianity: the Incarnation of the Word (*ibid*, 14).

The mysterious author of the “Areopagite writings” is believed to have lived after the Council of Nicaea and after the Cappadocian Fathers, most probably towards the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century. His approach to apophysis was borrowed from the Plotinian tradition is linked to a conception of the One who is “transcendent to everything which can be named” (including Christian theological teaching on the Trinitarian as well). This great writer, who writes under the cover of the authority of St. Paul’s disciple, teaches apophatism in its most elaborate form which becomes an essential part of the theological and mystical tradition of both the Christian East and West.

The Psalms state about God, "He made darkness his covering around Him" (Ps. 17 LXX). Likewise Moses had to seek for God in the darkness which covered Mt. Sinai. For many Christian exegetes, this darkness represents a condition of the knowledge of God (*In the Image and Likeness of God*, 32). It is used to emphasize the absolute transcendence of God, Who is inaccessible to all intellectual inquiry. It also is meant to remind us of the "ignorance about God proper to human reason when left to its own natural resources" (*ibid*, 33). Since Moses entered darkness in order to stand face to face with God, it is beyond the summit of intelligible things, that ignorance begins (*ibid*, 33). Man cannot learn of God from men, which is why Moses speaks to Him in the darkness of human ignorance. This is also why Moses calls upon God to show Himself to him. Moses' exchange (and apophatic theology) result from faith in a personal God of which we would know nothing about if He had not revealed Himself to us. (*ibid*, 34).

Ultimately, according to St. Clement of Alexandria, all gnosis comes from God through His Son (*Strom.* 5:11). This comes through His grace but in order to attain it, we must make a leap of faith, flinging ourselves, as Clement states, "upon the majesty of Christ." As St. John the Theologian states, no one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, Who is in the Bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (Jn. 1:18). Thus it is only through the Light of Christ that we are liberated from our darkness of human ignorance.

But there is another form of darkness which is not pejorative in meaning. Clement refers to it as the "abyss" which is meant to signify the transcendence of the Father. We thus can come to know God, not in what He is but rather in what He is not, says Clement (*Strom.* 5:11). Even in His revelation, and seeing Him "face to face," God remains an unknowable abyss. Thus Apophasis makes known to us God's radical transcendence. Total ignorance is needed before we can enter into communion with the One who transcends all knowledge.

St. Gregory of Nyssa sees darkness as an allegorization of the darkness of Exodus and combines this with the image of the night in the Song of Songs (*ibid*, 37). By this darkness Gregory sees a representation of the fact that the closer the soul gets to God, the more the invisibility of His divine nature is realized. True knowledge of God rests in "understanding that seeing consists in not seeing." Thus the cloud of Sinai represents a form of communion with God which is purer and far beyond the Theophany Moses received in the burning bush. This kind of union with God surpasses vision or *theoria*. It goes beyond intelligence to a place where there is no knowledge but only love. *Gnosis* (knowledge) becomes transformed into *agape* (love). Just as the Bride of the Song of Songs awaits her Bridegroom, the soul's love for God grows more and more without ceasing. Lossky writes, the "ascent in God has no limit" and "beatitude is an infinite progress" (*ibid*, 37). Thus for St. Gregory of Nyssa, darkness signifies God's radical unknowability and this acts as a stimulus towards union with the divine essence. Man seeks to go beyond himself, towards the infinite deifying participation without ever being fully satiated (*ibid*, 38).

The object of our vision is God's divine light and this is contemplated "in the pure atmosphere of the heart" because the kingdom of heaven is within us. It is knowing the total lack of correlation between creature and Creator that makes union with God more preferable than knowledge of God (*ibid*, 38). As St. Gregory of Nyssa said, "Blessedness consists not in knowing

something about God but in having him within us" (On the Beatitudes, Hom. 6). In fact it is union with God which brings about knowledge of God and not the converse.

Pseudo-Dionysius makes this even clearer in his writings. According to Dionysius, "darkness becomes invisible in light -and above all in abundant light" and "knowledge purges ignorance -and above all abundant knowledge." Thus ignorance of God can remain hidden from those who have positive light and knowledge. The transcendent darkness of God allows itself to be concealed by all that is light, but it also throws into the shadow all that is knowledge..." (*In the Image and Likeness of God*, Lossky, 39). Dionysius explains that if in seeing God one were to understand what he saw, this would mean he did not see God but rather something knowable that belongs to Him. In Himself, God is beyond all understanding and beyond all essence. As Lossky explains, "He exists in a manner above essence and is known beyond all understanding only inasmuch as He is totally unknown and does not exist at all. And it is this perfect lack of knowledge... which is the knowledge of Him who surpasses all that can be known" (*ibid*, 39). God by nature remains transcendent, "even in the immanence of His manifestation" (*ibid*, 40). This is why the creature must continually go beyond itself in order to open itself to communion with the uncreated One. But it is important to note that God is neither darkness nor light. As Dionysius states, "He transcends both affirmation and negation." Lossky adds, "Christian transcendence is beyond all opposition... it goes beyond the opposition between transcendence and immanence" (*ibid*, 40). God reveals Himself by His *dynameis* in all beings. His creatures move towards deification through His deifying grace.

Thus it is the whole man, and not just his spirit or intelligence which enters into communion with God. In Dionysius "the doctrine of spiritual senses... finds all its value in the 'visible theophany' the vision of the light of the transfigured Christ" (*ibid*, 42). Yet at the same time the intelligence receives illumination. In union with God, in moving towards the unknowable nature of God, man goes beyond knowledge and reaches towards infinite progress (*ibid*, 42). Thus simultaneously Christ is seen face to face, God is fully manifested, He is known in His revealing *diakriseis*, and yet, in the union, He surpasses all vision and all knowledge, for His super-essential nature always remains inaccessible (*ibid*, 42). As a result of his great apophatic doctrine Dionysius stands as an authentic presenter of Byzantine Theology in its proper sense. He taught the dynamic manifestation of God, and acknowledged the distinction between God's essence which is unknowable and God's processions (Grk. *dynameis*) -which would later be known as "energies." This would become the basis for the Orthodox doctrine regarding the vision of God in later theology (*ibid*, 43).

In closing, Dionysius beautifully synthesizes all of the above stating: "We shall become incorruptible and immortal, having reached the state of blessedness and having become like Christ, we shall be forever with the Lord... enjoying His visible theophany in most pure contemplations, illumined by His bright rays just as the disciples were at the time of His divine Transfiguration; then, with intelligence which is without passion and without matter, we shall share in His intelligible participation, and also in a union beyond all intelligence, in the unknowable yet blessed shining of rays which are more than bright, in a state which is like that of the heavenly spirits." (*De div. nom.* 1:4, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, Lossky, 42). It is only through the apophatic approach to the contemplation of God that we can attain this

blessedness. Apophasis helps us to attain union with God rather than knowledge about Him. Before this contemplation can begin the apophasis of the senses must first be undergone in order to enable us to know Him -who is unknowable through knowledge. Thus we become inwardly purified of all that is not God in order to experience Him in absolute ignorance. Thus apophasis stands as the only true way to union with God.