Negative Theologies and the Cross

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So many postmodern theologians are busy retrieving "negative theology," while others label such retrievals "misconstruals," that observers might be tempted to conclude that there was, or is, such a single thing as "negative theology." Yet anyone seeking a definition or even sampling relevant texts encounters a diverse array of premodern apophatic authors with a multiplicity of negative theologies. I here survey some of the diverse strands of Christian negative theology and argue in favor of one strand of that tradition in relation to Christ, the incarnation, and the cross.[1]

The biblical foundations for negative theology are explicit. "My thoughts are higher than your thoughts," says Isaiah's LORD (Isa 55:9). The divine is *in*visible, *in*effable, *in*comprehensible; these are all negations stemming from a recognition of divine transcendence. Early authors such as Justin, Ireneaus, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria built their theologies on these foundations. God by definition transcends our words, concepts, and capacities, such that all affirmations must be qualified and only negations are entirely true. So what? Or, rather, *then* what? Some authors make significant theological moves after the negations, drawing on this apophatic awareness of the surpassing transcendence of the Infinite, but they make *different* moves, and those differences are my main theme here. In short, where do such negations lead?

All types of Christian negative theology keep negations *connected*; they do not isolate some apophatic principle of God's transcendence as if it were an independent epistemological truth. Negations remain connected, first of all, to affirmations, for there must be something to be negated, some content to work with; even negative prefixes negate some specific positive quality. Secondly, the negations are

[1] I thank Harvard Divinity School for the invitation and hospitality surrounding the Dudleian Lecture on 17 April 2008. I am most grateful to Sarah Coakley for her specific critique, as partially reflected in this revised text.

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closely connected to biblical texts, since both the negations and the words that are negated are originally scriptural. Indeed, biblical symbols and metaphors reveal the interplay of affirmation and negation: the symbol is both like and *un*like God. Finally, these biblical negations remain connected to liturgical communities. The Christian apophatic grows out of worshipping communities, not abstract inquiry. It is a misconstrual of negative theology to regard the apophatic as a free-floating epistemological principle for individuals, isolated from the cataphatic, from its biblical origins, and from liturgical communities of faith.[2]

To illustrate how theological negations can lead to different outcomes, I here propose three categories: the progressive apophatic, the complete apophatic, and the incarnational apophatic. Each has a central biblical source, a Greek Father, and later adherents in Latin Christianity. How each finds echoes in modern or postmodern discussions is more than I can document here.[3]

The Progressive Apophatic

In his "Contemplation on the Life of Moses," Gregory of Nyssa develops a biblical narrative into an apophatic theology. Promised God's favor and presence, Moses pleads to see God: "Show me your glory, I pray" (Exod 33:18). But what does it mean "to behold" God? Can one really do so "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exod 33:11)? No, says the LORD, "I will make my goodness pass before you . . . but you cannot see my face" (Exod 33:19–20). Moses is hidden in the cleft of a rock, and only *after* God's glory passes by may he look. "You shall see my back," says the LORD, "but my face shall not be seen" (Exod 33:23).

Here Gregory advances a profound and influential interpretation. Moses does behold God, but with an apophatic twist. That Moses sees God's back or backside is neither inappropriately anthropomorphic nor absurdly crude, in Gregory's reading, but rather calls for a spiritual interpretation, an uplifting or "anagogical" exegesis. As if on Jacob's ladder, says Gregory, Moses "continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained."[4] Reviewing the life of Moses, Gregory charts the Mosaic ascent and ceaseless desire to continue to ascend, culminating in this bold request to behold God. Here negation is gently implied in the idea of rising above one's current level; stepping higher entails leaving the lower behind in a type of denial that is repeated over and over. As high as Moses may climb, "he

[2] Negative theology has "both a grammar *and* a vocabulary . . . the positive vocabulary of saying," not just a grammar of *un*saying, writes Mark Burrows, "Words that Reach into the Silence: Mystical Languages of Unsaying," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (ed. Mark Burrows and Elizabeth A. Dreyer; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 213.

[3] But see Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word* (ed. O. Davies and D. Turner; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 11–34, for links from some of these same premodern authors to various postmodern discussions.

[4] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 2.227 (trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson; New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 114.

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is still unsatisfied in his desire for more."[5] Here Gregory's apophatic becomes explicit: "the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics; [it] transcends knowledge; the Divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary."[6] "This truly is the vision of God," says Gregory, "never to be satisfied in the desire to see him."[7] To see God's back instead of God's face is not to view a static image of a physical back but to engage in the dynamic process of following someone. It is to follow where God is leading, for "he who follows sees the back."[8] God leads Moses still higher, ever higher, always leaving behind the lower steps in a progressive apophatic. "So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught *how* he can behold Him; to follow God wherever he might lead *is* to behold God."[9] This kind of dynamic negative theology recognizes that God is always beyond our grasp, our concepts, and our words, a recognition accompanied not by nihilistic despair but by the perpetual "hope [that] always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond."[10]

Thus, to see God's back is to follow God ever higher, a gentle form of the apophatic linked to Gregory by Jean Daniélou under the term "epektasis," or "perpetual progress."[11] This endless pursuit of the infinite and inexhaustible divine nature is what I call the "progressive apophatic." Moses is the best biblical example of this phenomenon, but Gregory also interprets the Song of Songs this way, and he weaves Christ into both narratives. The bride in the Song, like Moses, pleads to see the Lover's face, but he passes by (Song 5:6), not to forsake her but rather to draw her toward himself. She advances "towards that which lies before her and by always going out from what she has comprehended."[12] Of course, once the Song of Songs enters the picture, the apophatic is more than knowing and unknowing; Gregory's theme of "epektasis" applies not only to progressive knowledge of God by unknowing, but also to ceaseless desire and love for God. Negations thus lead to other, ever "higher" negations. This kind of progress, a generic form of negative theology, was often linked to the apostle Paul's example of "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3.13).

With such a broad biblical pedigree, it is no wonder that this theme surfaces in many later authors, Greek and Latin, with no necessary connection to Gregory of

[5] Gregory, *Life of Moses* 2.230.

[6] Ibid. 2.234–235.

[7] Ibid. 2.239.

[8] Ibid. 2.251.

[9] Ibid. 2.252.

[10] Ibid. 2.231.

[11] For an overview, see Daniélou, "*Platonisme et théologie mystique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944); for more detail, see Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (4 vols.; New York: Crossroads, 1994) 1:14. McGinn describes Gregory's as "the first systematic negative theology in Christian history."

[12] Gregory, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (trans. C. McCambley; Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 1987) 218.

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Nyssa (although his work did enter the Latin world in the early medieval translation and appropriation by Eriugena). Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, for example, take up the theme of perpetual progress in the spiritual life; such progress is perhaps "epektetic," to use McGinn's adjectival coinage, but it is minimally apophatic. For Bernard, the Pauline model of "striving ceaselessly"[13] is largely an affair of the heart, endless desire rather than endless knowledge. William of Saint Thierry combines intellect and love most expertly; for him the shared ascent of mind and heart is an endless progression, perpetually leaving behind that which has been known and loved. "Always to advance in this way is to arrive."[14]

Like his friend and soulmate Bernard, William usually applies this theme of endless progress to the desires of the heart. Yet he also makes an apophatic point about unknowing, raising the matter, like Gregory, in connection to Moses in Exodus 33. When Moses is told, "you cannot see my face," this refers to knowledge of the divine majesty, according William. "That knowledge is best known in this life by unknowing; the highest knowledge that a man can here and now attain consists in knowing in what way he does not know."[15]

There are many other authors, medieval and modern, who share an affinity for this way of emphasizing an outcome of negative theology, the "progressive apophatic" that recognizes God's transcendence and thus the limitations of human capacity to grasp the divine. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, built on this tradition, with explicit appreciation for Gregory of Nyssa.[16] To give Gregory the last word in this section:

> More is always being grasped, and yet something beyond that which has been grasped will always be discovered, and this search will never overtake its Object, because its fund is as inexhaustible as the growth of that which participates in it is ceaseless.[17]

No particular polemics accompany this benign outcome of apophatic theology, that negations lead to more negations without end, but other authors take Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai to another end, with more controversial results.

[13] McGinn, *The Presence of God*, 2:216.

[14] Ibid., 2:260; William of Saint Thierry, *The Way to Divine Union* (trans. M. Basil Pennington; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1998) 95.

[15] *On Contemplating God* (ed. Sister Penelope; Cistercian Fathers Series 3; Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977) 137.

[16] "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 359. I owe this reference to a helpful conversation with Stacy Johnson.

[17] *Contra Eunomium* 1.291, lines 15–20 (trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson; PG 45:340D; *NPNF*^{2} 5:62) 112. See Deirdre Carabine, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God," in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity* (ed. T. Finan and V. Twomey; Dublin: Four Courts, 1992) 98.

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The Complete Apophatic

After the "progressive apophatic," here represented by Gregory of Nyssa, the second expression of negative theology I am proposing is the "complete apophatic," which originated with Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius. This early sixth-century author knew the Cappadocian (and Alexandrian) tradition, but artfully disguised his debts. Like Gregory, Dionysius depicts Moses climbing higher and higher, leaving behind and thus denying the lower steps, negations leading to more negations; but after this temporary similarity there is a difference at the peak, in the darkness or cloud of unknowing. When the Dionysian Moses negates everything that is less than God, he completes his apophatic ascent and finds himself united with the Unknown God in the end. Negations lead ultimately to union with God. The apostle Paul's sermon in Acts 17, indeed, began with the "unknown God" and ended up converting the original Dionysius and Damaris.

As a whole, the Pseudo-Dionysian writings convey a devout reverence for the transcendence of God, which is formulated in biblical terms. "We offer worship," opens *The Divine Names*, "to that of the divine which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible."[18] What immediately follows, however, is not a wise silence alone, or flat negation, but a complex engagement with Scripture according to an anagogical or uplifting interpretation that combines affirmation and negation:

> With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible. We are raised up [uplifted] to the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us, with our beings shaped to songs of praise, we behold the divine light, in a manner befitting us, and our praise resounds for that generous Source of all holy enlightenment, a Source which has told us about itself in the holy words of scripture.[19]

Dionysian apophatic theology, specifically in *The Mystical Theology*, can leave the misleading impression of an isolated and abstract principle that God is flatly unknowable. On the contrary, as I have elsewhere argued at some length, the Dionysian apophatic is paired with the kataphatic or affirmative theology in the interpretation of Scripture first of all.[20] The idea that negations about God are simply true whereas affirmations always need to be qualified (*The Celestial Hierarchy* 2) is all about interpreting the Bible. Such symbols as a cornerstone or the wind are both like and *un*like God, and so are the human concepts that stem from their exegesis. This anagogical interpretation of "the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures," furthermore, is not individualistic but communal, not abstract but concretely based on the Scriptures and the liturgy of the faith community. All three variations on the

[18] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* 1.589B. All translations of Pseudo-Dionysius are from *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works* (trans. Colm Luibheid; New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

[19] Ibid.

[20] Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 53–57; 194–205, with other studies mentioned there.

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apophatic presented here begin with the positive contents of Scripture in Christian communities of faithful worship and praise for the transcendent God.

So, Dionysius, like Gregory, charts the progress of Moses through purification and illumination up to perfection or union, but then there is a difference. Gregory's Moses never stops ascending, for his progressive apophatic is everlasting. The Dionysian apophatic is not perpetual but completed, in that Moses does arrive, and it is absolute in that by negating and surpassing everything that is not God, Moses ends up in God, united with God. Breaking free of what sees or is seen, Moses

> plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the wholly Unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.[21]

After all the biblical interpretation of the perceptible and the conceptual in the liturgical context of a worshipping community, the finale of the Dionysian apophatic is union with God. In the end, negation and silence is the direct way to the Unknown God, beyond words and thoughts. The apophatic is complete, not progressive, and it exists in ecstatic eternity, not everlasting time. It is also radically complete, for God is finally "not wisdom nor one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness; it is not spirit or son or fatherhood" (*The Mystical Theology*, chapter 5). Although it is only five pages long, *The Mystical Theology* invites extensive commentary, and I long ago offered my own, thirty pages worth. In this context, however, I take leave of Dionysius instead with a quotation from the end of *The Divine Names*.

Following all of his philosophical interpretation of the biblical names for God, the Areopagite's longest treatise also turns apophatic, and it moves toward the same climax of ecstatic union with God. Dionysius agrees with the Scripture writers, for

> their preference is for the way up through negations, since this stands the soul outside everything which is correlative with its own finite nature [i.e. renders the soul ecstatic]. Such a way guides the soul through all the divine notions which are themselves transcended by that which is far beyond every name, all reason and all knowledge. Beyond the outermost boundaries of the world, the soul is brought into union with God himself to the extent that every one of us is capable of it.[22]

The Dionysian apophatic culminates in union with God, beyond all affirmations and negations. Symbols and concepts, assertions with denials, have charted the way, but in the end they are all left behind. This variety of negative theology seeks and finds God by negating all that is less than the infinite God, including all finite

[21] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* 1.1001A.

[22] Ibid., *Divine Names* 13.981B.

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words and concepts. No wonder that some later "mystical" theologians embraced the Dionysian form of negation, but only a few, for it is difficult to sustain the absolute apophatic by itself above and beyond the "progressive apophatic." Perhaps the best example, surely the best-known, is Meister Eckhart.

Skipping many centuries, and the thin Dionysian thread into Western Latin theology by way of Eriugena's translation and comments, we come to a Dominican tradition of negative theology. Albert the Great is the key figure here, before Thomas Aquinas and his mountain of material, especially in Albert's commentary on the Dionysian *Mystical Theology*. Albert is rigorously apophatic when introducing the Areopagite's interpretation of Moses' ascent into the darkness of unknowing. Regarding lights and sounds and words, he says, "all these things have to be transcended, because none of them is what we seek in contemplation."[23] Albert maintains the Dionysian insistence that Moses is united with the utterly unknown God by knowing nothing, and he does so without adding love to the experience as others did and do.[24] Albert remains completely apophatic right to the end of *The Mystical Theology*, where the "transcendence of him who is above all [even] transcends all negation. The names which are denied of him are denied because of his transcendence . . . [and] his transcendence defeats all negation."[25]

As launched by Albert and developed by Thomas, a Dominican trajectory epitomized by Meister Eckhart applied the mendicant ideal of poverty to apophatic theology, not only owning nothing or wanting nothing but also "knowing nothing,"[26] in the special sense later called "learned ignorance." Eckhart very much liked and quoted the Dionysian caution about the "wise silence" that honors the inexpressible, and the idea that negations are true whereas affirmations are unsuitable.[27] God is beyond all names and words, even "good" or "being," since God is beyond our understanding. If you have a God you can understand, goes the Augustinian saying that Eckhart passes on, it is not really God.[28] Commenting on Exodus 33, Eckhart says, "The meaning is then 'Moses went into the darkness wherein God was,' that is, into the surpassing light that beats down and darkens our intellect."[29] He here quotes the Areopagite's *Letter One*, "Perfect ignorance is the knowledge of him who is over all that is known."[30] Here, echoing Dionysius' comments on Moses,

[23] *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (ed. Simon Tugwell; New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 158, trans. adjusted.

[24] McGinn, *Presence of God*, 4:23–24; see also my *Commentary*, 214–25.

[25] *Albert and Thomas*, 198.

[26] *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (ed. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn; New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 199–203. To be abbreviated as *Essential Eckhart*.

[27] *Essential Eckhart*, 280; *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (ed. Bernard McGinn; New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 70. To be abbreviated Eckhart, *Teacher*.

[28] *Essential Eckhart*, 206–7. Si comprehendis, non est Deus. "If you understand [it], it is not God." (Augustine's *Sermon* 117.3.5 (PL 38:663).

[29] Eckhart, *Teacher*, 117.

[30] Ibid., 118; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Letter One* 1065B.

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is Eckhart's complete apophatic, which constitutes the famous "breakthrough" into God beyond God, the sinking into the nothingness of God. Love takes God with a garment on, namely, God's goodness, but knowing and unknowing "peels everything away, and takes God bare," yet "can never encompass him in the sea of his unfathomableness."[31] With the "negation of negation" the apophatic is absolute, and that is how one breaks through to God, in the unfathomable sea. Angela of Foligno, Hadewich, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and especially Marguerite Porete also spoke of the "abyss" in this way, as Amy Hollywood has pointed out.[32] "Abyss" is itself a negation (a-byssum), but in the sense of a negativity regarding dereliction or abandonment, as McGinn argues,[33] rather than an apophasis about God per se. To conclude with Meister Eckhart: here, too, as with Dionysius, negative theology is not an abstract principle of language or religious epistemology, but rather a way of interpreting Scripture within the community of faith. This is clearer among the Byzantines, such as Gregory Palamas, but Eckhart's best expressions of this complete apophatic do occur in his homilies, meaning that they are founded on biblical content and take place within a liturgical context.[34] In this respect, the postmodern contender for expressing a complete apophatic, namely, Jacques Derrida, was correct to distance himself from Dionysius and Eckhart, because they held on to the biblical content within liturgical communities, whereas he wanted no such kataphatic baggage.[35] The Dionysian basis of this outcome of negative theology (that negations lead to more negations *and* ultimately to union with God) immediately came in for some vigorous commentary exactly on this apophatic point.

The Incarnational Apophatic

When Dionysius took his apophatic method to the extreme (stating that God is not wisdom or oneness, divinity or goodness, not Spirit or Son or Father), it was too much for some readers, including the first commentators. In the *Scholia*, or marginal comments attributed to Maximus the Confessor, we read:

[31] Eckhart, *Teacher*, 254.

[32] Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) 131.

[33] Bernard McGinn, "The Hidden God in Luther and Some Mystics," in *Silence and the Word,* 103–10. See also McGinn's forthcoming essay, "Three Forms of Negativity in Christian Mysticism," in *Sciences and Religions: Knowing the Unknowable about God and the Universe* (ed. John W. Bowker; London: I.B. Tauris).

[34] For Eckhart and Dionysius, see Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads, 2001) 177–78.

[35] See especially the discussion between Derrida and Marion in Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name, How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999) 42–47, 68–70. Jeffrey Fisher argues for the compatibility of Derrida and Dionysius in "The Theology of Dis/similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001) 529–48.

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> Do not let this chapter disturb you and do not think that this divine man is blaspheming. His purpose is to show that God is not a being among beings but is beyond beings. For if [God] himself has brought forth all beings in creation, how can he be found to be one being among other beings?[36]

What then to do with this "apostolic" apophatic? Once one allows Dionysius to define the terms, as do most of the premodern thinkers I am exploring here, one has limited the field considerably, as Grace Jantzen, Beverly Lanzetta and other feminist theologians have rightly pointed out.[37]

The first commentator, John of Scythopolis, tried to preserve some knowing amid the unknowing. Entering the darkness, "Moses in unknowing knew everything. . . . [Dionysius] explains here how God is known through unknowing."[38] Even *The Mystical Theology*'s final list of negations ("not spirit or sonship or fatherhood") is tempered by John's paraphrase in that he retains the term "Trinity." "No one knows the pure *Trinity* as it is. . . . We do not know what the subsistence of the pure *Trinity* is, for we are not of its essence."[39] What John of Scythopolis does with specific Dionysian texts is fascinating but fragmentary.

A clearer example of turning the Dionysian apophatic to a different end, the third and final outcome for negative theology covered here, is the work of Maximus the Confessor. As hinted in the *Scholia*, Maximus interpreted Dionysius directly in his other works. In order to approach God "entirely above essence and entirely above thought," Moses enters the darkness of unknowing, "beyond the whole nature of the intelligible and the sensible realities."[40] But then what? Here is the decisive theological, or rather Christological, move in applying the apophatic impulse. Yes, "no one has ever seen God," as the evangelist John says, but what then? Maximus makes his move, a decisive move, and it is not Dionysian.

> The knowledge of [God the Word] himself in his essence and personhood remains inaccessible to all angels and men alike and he can in no way be known by anyone. But St. John, initiated as perfectly as humanly possible into the meaning of the Word's incarnation, claims that he has seen the glory of the Word as flesh, that is, he saw the reason or the plan for which God became man, full of grace and truth. For it was not as God by essence, consubstantial to God the Father, that the only-begotten Son gave this grace, but

[36] PG 4:429; of uncertain authorship, not by John of Scythopolis, perhaps by Maximus.

[37] Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 109; Beverly Lanzetta, "*Via Feminina* and the Un-saying of 'Woman,'" in *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005) 15–16. .

[38] PG 4:421AB. See Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 244.

[39] PG 4:432B, Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 248 [emphasis added].

[40] Maximus, *Chapters on Knowledge* 2.82–83, in *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings* (ed. and trans. George C. Berthold; New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 144.

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> as having in the incarnation become man by nature, and consubstantial to us, that he bestows grace on us who have need of it.[41]

In the evangelist John's terms, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). Negations thus lead to Christ incarnate.

Here the apophatic serves the incarnational, just as the apostle Paul's sermon in Athens began with the Unknown God and ended with the one raised from the dead. For Maximus, the apophatic recognition of God's transcendence does not lead to endless progress as it does for Gregory, or directly to union with the unknown God as it does for Dionysius, but rather to Christ as the incarnate revelation of God. Where the first outcome invoked endless time and the second featured ecstatic eternity, this third emphasizes salvation history. Of course Gregory and Dionysius had their own Christologies, as various texts show, but their apophatic moves went in other directions, with other outcomes. Maximus is not critiquing Dionysius, the apostolic Father, but his text supplements the Areopagite's with this direct link between negative theology and the incarnation. To put it flatly, because we cannot know God as transcendent, we look instead to God as incarnate. Dionysius never makes this connection explicit. His negative theology never turns christological in *The Mystical Theology* or *The Divine Names*, and his comments on Christ, the incarnation, and the cross in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* never turn apophatic.[42] There is one hint of the connection in *Letter Three*: "the transcendent has put aside its own hiddenness and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being" yet remaining hidden.[43] This connection is never developed in Dionysius, however. It is Maximus who develops it, moving from the apophatic regarding God's (immanent) transcendence to the kataphatic regarding God's (economic) incarnation. Where do negations lead? Where Gregory features "epektasis" or endless progress, and Dionysius emphasized "apophasis" or absolute negation, Maximus repeatedly turns to "kenosis," the idea that the divine Word emptied itself into human likeness to the point of death, as the apostle Paul says.

This variation on negative theology has many expressions. In the East, we would encounter the distinction between essence and energies or activities. The Western Latin tradition discussed here moves from a broad application of negative theology to the incarnation and human life in general to a specific focus on the mortality and death of Christ in particular. In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure, for example, follows the Pauline "kenosis" from the divine down to the "human form" all the way

[41] Maximus, *Chapters on Knowledge* 2:76; Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 52–54.

[42] Ysabel de Andia has written eloquently on the Dionysian apophatic and on the cross in Dionysius: "La théologie négative et la croix," in *Denys l'Aréopagite. Tradition et métamorphoses* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2006) 107–27. Yet she does not establish any direct linkage between the apophatic and the cross in Dionysius, in my judgment.

[43] *Letter Three*, 1069B. I owe this qualification to the helpful critique of Charles Stang, whose Harvard dissertation develops a Dionysian apophatic anthropology in another way.

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to the "point of death," and he does so with an explicit move from the Dionysian apophatic to a Franciscan focus on Christ crucified. At the culmination of his classic work, *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure turns apophatic in his own way. Passing over into God in ecstatic contemplation, as Francis did, means that "all intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God."[44] Here Bonaventure has integrated love into unknowing, following the Victorine line, a subject that I am pursuing elsewhere. Yet there is more. He explicitly quotes Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* at some length, regarding the "ecstasy of a pure mind leaving behind all things and freed from all things, you will ascend to the superessential ray of divine darkness."[45] Then the Franciscan makes the Christological move from Moses and darkness to Christ, and not merely to the incarnation of Christ but all the way to the cross. When one seeks the Dionysian "superessential ray of the divine darkness," he suggests, one enters the silent darkness of death with Christ crucified.

> Whoever loves this death can see God because it is true beyond doubt that "man shall not see me and live" (Exod 33:20). Let us, then, die and enter the darkness; let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires and our imaginings. With Christ crucified let us pass "out of this world to the Father" (John 13:1).[46]

The ending of Bonaventure's "Itinerary" is allusive and poetic and profoundly moving, far beyond the confines of negative theology. Nevertheless, with Maximus, Bonaventure moves from the Dionysian apophatic to a christological proclamation. Moving beyond the Confessor's focus on the incarnation, the Seraphic Doctor stresses the culmination of the incarnation in the cross, following the Pauline "kenosis" to the end.

This specific outcome of negative theology, moving from the apophatic to the crucified, is also represented by Martin Luther, and helps put his critique of Dionysius into the context of a prior tradition, before the usual legacy of John Tauler. Like Maximus and Bonaventure, Luther knew well the negative theology of the Dionysian corpus. Unlike them, however, he did not revere this author as the Areopagite of Acts 17 and in fact quite openly ridiculed this Dionysius, "whoever he was," for his "hodge-podge" about angels, his idle liturgical allegories, and especially his dangerous teachings in *The Mystical Theology*.[47] In *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther writes,

> So far, indeed, from learning Christ in them [the Dionysian works], you will lose even what you already know of him. I speak from experience. Let us

[44] Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God* 7.4 (ed. and trans. Ewert Cousins; New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 113.

[45] Ibid. 7.5.

[46] Ibid. 7.6.

[47] Paul Rorem, "Martin Luther's Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality," *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (1997) 291–307.

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> rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).[48]

Elsewhere, Luther directly addresses the subject of "negative theology" and how it should turn us to the incarnation and the cross. Early and late in his career he expressed differences with Dionysius regarding Sinai's cloud or darkness of unknowing. In the very early *Dictata* on the Psalms, he writes:

> Therefore [b.] Dionysius teaches that one must enter into anagogical darkness and ascend by way of denials. For thus God is hidden and beyond understanding. [Alternatively], this can be understood as referring to the mystery of the Incarnation. For He is concealed in humanity, which is His darkness. Here He could not be seen but only heard.[49]

Here, toward the beginning of his career, Luther makes the same point that Maximus made, turning from the darkness of the absolute God to the mystery of the incarnation in humanity.[50] Later, Luther went still further, not only in his bold critique of Dionysius but also in following the "kenosis" of an incarnational negative theology all the way to the cross, as with Bonaventure.

> Therefore Dionysius, who wrote about "negative theology" and "affirmative theology," deserves to be ridiculed. [In the latter part of his work] he defines "affirmative theology" as "God is being." "Negative theology" he defines as "God is nonbeing." But, if we wish to give a true definition of "negative theology," we should say that it is the holy cross and the afflictions [attending it].[51]

Luther's overall "theology of the cross" is too large a topic to discuss here.[52] The pertinent point is that Luther explicitly moves from a Dionysian apophatic to a "negative theology" of the cross. The "mystical theologians," he writes elsewhere, may call going into the darkness "ascending beyond being and non-being," preferring to omit all pictures of Christ's suffering; but, he says rather emphatically, "The CROSS alone is our theology."[53]

When Luther says, "Let us rather hear Paul," he refers to the apostle Paul's foolishness of the cross, that God is not so much "unknown" as "hidden" in Christ.

[48] *Luther's Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann; 55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–) 36:109; *Luthers Werke* (ed. J. F. K. Knaake et al.; 57 vols.; Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Weimar: Bohlau, 1883–) 6:562, lines 8–13 (hereafter cited as WA).

[49] *Luther's Works,* 10:119–20; WA 3:124, lines 32–35.

[50] See also Luther's comment that "inexperienced monks rise into heaven with their speculations and think about God as He is in himself. From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish," *Luther's Works* 12:312; WA 40/2:329.

[51] *Luther's Works*, 13:110–11; WA 40/3:543, lines 8–13.

[52] See now Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). In the fourth (1954) edition of Walther von Loewenich's classic *Luthers theologia crucis* (Munich: Kaiser, 1954), his new "Afterword" reconsidered how Luther's theology of the cross related to prior traditions of mysticism (245–48).

[53] WA 5:176, lines 27–33. Cf. WA 56:299, line 27, to 300, line 3; *Luther's Works*, 25:287.

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That Dionysius had applied 1 Corinthians instead to a general statement about negations was already a concern to the Areopagite's first commentator, back in the sixth century. John of Scythopolis then wrote, "Note how the father understood the saying of the apostle, for Chrysostom and the other fathers understood it to apply to the cross."[54] John does not suggest that Dionysius neglects the cross in general, but points out that the Areopagite did not here move from foolishness/wisdom to Christ crucified. Thus, with "other fathers" who turned negative theology to the cross, we should regard Luther as continuing the Pauline concerns of John the scholiast, Maximus the Confessor, and Bonaventure the Franciscan in this third use of the apophatic.

Yet Luther goes further still, uncomfortably for apophatic theologians. "Negative theology" does not lead neatly to the cross; it is actually opposed to the cross. Insofar as any negative theology seeks to manage God, it glorifies the self and is thus condemned by the cross. Negative theology can be all about our self-analysis, our recognition of the infinite, our epistemology, what we can and cannot know, but the cross is about God's "kenosis," the infinite in the finite, the divine soteriology, what God has done and will yet do. Further, for Luther, this Christological turn is not simply a safe approach to God through the crucified, some successful albeit indirect access to the transcendent God after all. God preached is hidden and revealed in Christ, but the God not preached remains hidden, beyond our theological strategies.[55] Discourse about negative theology and the cross is not the point; for Luther, a theoretical theology of the cross is futile. What matters is when the Word of the cross kills and makes alive again. The bad news for negative theology, Luther insists, is that the incarnate one died because we tortured and killed him, we who are not God and who are indeed opposed to God.[56] "You have become his betrayers and murderers," said Stephen (Acts 7:52). Luther's negative theology of the cross turns to the condemnation of the law, first of all, the active proclamation of judgment unto repentance, and then to the gospel. When God's Word of and on the cross destroys our theologies, apophatic and otherwise, then true faith in God is born.

Summary

To be simplistically kataphatic about it, there are at least these three outcomes for negative theology from the premodern tradition. First, a perpetual or "progressive apophatic" based on Exodus 33, with Moses ever advancing morally and spiritually by following God in everlasting time. Negations lead to more negations. Second, a "complete apophatic," which understands Sinai's darkness of unknowing in Exodus

[54] *Scholia* 340.4 on *Divine Names* 7.865B; Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 226.

[55] David Tracy uses and advances Brian Gerrish's categories of Hiddenness 1 and Hiddenness 2, in "The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 46 (1996) 5–16.

[56] *Luther's Works*, 42:10; G. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997) 3, 8.

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19 and 20 as mystical union with God in ecstatic eternity. Negations lead to union with God. Third, an "incarnational apophatic," following John 1 and Philippians 2, which explicitly turns from this darkness to the incarnation and cross of Christ in salvation history. Negations describing God transcendent lead to faith in God incarnate and crucified.

Gregory of Nyssa taught "epektasis," followed by William of St. Thierry and many others; Dionysius taught an "apophasis" of union, followed by Meister Eckhart and very few others; Maximus the Confessor taught the Pauline "kenosis," which was taken further by Bonaventure to the death of Christ and still further by Martin Luther. There may have been other types or better examples; there are surely different apophatic moves possible today.

What moderns and postmoderns make of all this, I leave to others to discern, with just a few suggestions. Emmanuel Levinas and others echo the progress of Moses following God. Jacques Derrida wanted a complete apophatic, but distanced himself from Dionysius and Eckhart for their linkage of the apophatic to the (biblical) kataphatic and to the (liturgical) community of faith. In modern theology, the classical orthodox tradition of Maximus, apart from the Latin Bonaventure and the Protestant Luther, has been represented ably, even beautifully, by Hans Urs von Balthasar.[57]

[57] Besides his direct expositions of Maximus, such as *The Cosmic Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), see the eloquent little "elucidation" on "The Unknown God," *Elucidations* (trans. John Riches; London: SPCK, 1975) 18–25.

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