

THE MODE OF THEOLOGISING:
MYSTERY & APOPHATICISM

O Trinity,
beyond being, beyond divinity, beyond goodness
and guide of Christians in divine wisdom,
direct us to the mystical summits
more than unknown and beyond light.
There are the simple, absolved,
and unchanged mysteries of theology
lie hidden in the darkness beyond light
Of the hidden mystical silence,
there, in the greatest darkness,
that beyond all that is most evident
exceedingly illuminates the sightless intellects.⁵

The above text is found at the beginning of the Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. We begin by looking at this prayer since it is important to understand the distinctive 'mode' of doing theology in the orthodox tradition before looking at its content.



Apothatic theology describes God by what He is not (negative statements), in contrast to cataphatic theology, which describes Him by what He is (positive statements).

THE ORTHODOX WAY

The beginning of theological contemplation is not to be found in theological handbooks or even in creedal formulations. Theology does not concern knowledge apprehended by the mind but a participation in the truth, which must be attained through prayer and the liturgical life of the Church. Andrew Louth, commenting on an extract from Maximus the Confessor's commentary on the Lord's Prayer, says, 'The way in which St Maximus understands theology is striking here. First, the mysteries of theology are mediated by a prayer, not by a creed or a treatise: we only understand by participating ourselves in prayer.'⁶ As he explains more fully elsewhere, one does not enter into the truth through rational engagement, but through prayer. This truth is not articulated but accessed through 'inarticulateness', through the silence.⁷

How then do we theologise? According to Louth, doctrines 'are not truths which could be appraised and

understood outside the bosom of the Church', but 'they are part of the church's reflection on the mystery of her life with God'.⁸ For this reason, the mode of theologising is 'primarily through participation in the divine liturgy, for it is here that the truths that we confess are not just brought to mind, but in some way enacted so that we can take part.'⁹

This mode is defined by the subject matter of 'theology'. As Lossky, following Dionysius the Aeropagite,¹⁰ maintains in his classic work, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*:

If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing (*ἀγνωσία*) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.¹¹

When surveying the typical Icon of the Transfiguration of the Lord, an event of particular importance for apophatic theology, we see the light of Mount Tabor radiating out from a centre that has been painted completely black. From that darkness a light shines forth, with the rays falling on the disciples. Of note here is the fact that Dionysius, in his *Mystical Theology*, speaks of 'ray of divine light' (I.I).

At the end of this ascent¹² of ‘theologising’, we do not find ‘understanding’ or ‘perception’ but union with God, usually expressed by the term, ‘theosis’. Lossky writes, ‘unknowability does not mean agnosticism or refusal to know God. Nevertheless, this knowledge will only be attained in the way which leads not to knowledge but to union—to deification.’¹³ This mode of theologizing is often referred to as ‘apophatic’, in contrast to ‘cataphatic’.

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE

It is worth noting several helpful aspects of this approach. First of all, the emphasis on the connection between theology on the one hand and worship and prayer on the other is a much needed reminder for other traditions, which tend to turn theology into a cold, academic discipline. Theology is intimately connected to the life of the church and is above all doxological and eucharistic. Something that indeed the early church confessed and lived out (*lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law of prayer is the law of belief). It is also important to take to heart the Orthodox emphasis that knowledge about God is not to be sought as an end in itself but always with the final goal of knowing God Himself and, more specifically, of being united with Him. Theology, therefore, is an ecclesiastical, doxological and even soteriological pursuit, as it pertains to a ‘knowledge’ that is personal and experiential.

Finally, it is good to be reminded of the limits of the theological endeavour. All too often, the mode of theologising in the West is characterised by a scholastic

and rationalistic approach, which gives the impression that it is possible to place God under a microscope and analyse Him.

Nonetheless, as A.N. Williams has rightly observed, 'Both moderate and radical apophaticism require a lot of explaining if they are to be reconciled with any Christian theology that insists on the primacy of the Bible',¹⁴ which is exactly what evangelical theology insists on. Is silence the only alternative to flippant God-talk? Lossky speaks of the 'margin of silence' as the authentic context of theology.¹⁵ Silence, however, is vague, potentially entailing anything from nothing to everything.

In the prayer referenced at the beginning of this chapter, we see Dionysius praying to the Trinity to lead him to the summit where he may encounter the mysteries of theology, hidden in the 'silence' of 'darkness'. This idea holds special significance for the apophatic way, since it is connected with the paradigmatic image of Moses' ascent up to Sinai, where he meets God in the darkness. Here of course, we must respond with the fact that, according to the Biblical narrative, although Moses ascends Sinai in order to meet God, he then descends having received ten 'words' from God. This underlines the essential role

Despite praying to encounter the mysteries hidden in the 'silence,' Dionysius is anything but silent as he proceeds to write about God. Here, Calvin's famous criticism of Dionysius is relevant. After describing Dionysius' Celestial Hierarchy as impressive at first but turning out to be 'nothing but talk', he then makes the comment, 'If you read that book, you would think a man fallen from heaven recounted not what he had learned but what he had seen with his own eyes' (*Institutes*, 1.14.4).

