

## Apophatic Spirituality

“What would you think if I told you that Christians believe God does not exist?” These perhaps startling words are the opening gambit in a chapter on creation from Mark McIntosh’s glorious primer on theology.<sup>i</sup> Although many contemporary Christians would instinctively recoil from the idea that their faith commits them to believing in the non-existence of God, McIntosh goes on to show that, at the very least, Christians *ought*, once they’ve thought about it, to believe that God doesn’t exist. Existence is a word that describes things and beings which count as “items in the universe”. McIntosh quotes the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God isn’t a being that exists, but the “sheer act of being itself”, not an item in the universe but its source.

McIntosh is a delightful and open-hearted guide to the complexities of Christian faith; on this occasion, however, he doesn’t go as far as he might have done. He could, on equally firm grounds, have argued that Christians believe any and all of the following claims too:

- *God is not Spirit*
- *God is not Father*
- *God is not Good*
- *God is not One (or Three)*
- *God is not known, or knowable*

When claims like these are made, of course, they are made in contexts of one sort or another. One kind of context would be an atheist one: they would be part of a wholesale rejection of all Christian belief and practice. Another kind of context might be the kind of doubt that many practising Christians feel, occasionally or more regularly – a sort of shaking or testing of what we have committed ourselves to. A third kind of context is the Christian apophatic tradition: a body of writings, a set of spiritual disciplines, a frame of reference, in which claims such as these are made deliberately, consistently, and faithfully.

‘Apophasis’ is a technical Greek term, but it’s worth using because it covers a range of meanings that we don’t have a good English catch-all for. In mathematics, it’s the Greek word for ‘subtraction’. Its literal meaning could be put into English as ‘saying-away’: in philosophy and theology, that covers a territory that runs, at one extreme, from *using negative words or phrases to deny something* (as in the examples already given), to a far extreme where we endeavor to move *away from saying*, altogether away from using either positive (e.g. ‘God is good’) or negative (e.g. ‘God is not good’) words.

Starting at the ‘near end’, so to speak, let’s focus first on those negative words and phrases. There’s an obvious point about the order we speak in. There’s no point in saying ‘God does not exist’ to a room full of people who have never thought about God or felt inclined to claim that God does exist. The negation, in order to have any point to it, has to come second, after someone has claimed that there is a God, and at least some people have interpreted that as implying God’s existence. The same is true, of course, for all those other examples – we only deny God’s goodness, fatherhood, triunity etc. when someone has first asserted them. Apophatic spirituality gets going when we, the very same ones who have claimed and continue to claim that God exists, is good, father, one and so on, also deny that these things

are true. So, apophasis is a verbal gesture that *believers* make, and it goes along with a range of spiritual practices that are integrated within a life of faith, not a sign that one is abandoning faith.

One reason for practising apophasis as a kind of 'holy denial', therefore, arises directly out of our experience of living as people of faith: things change. We grow, we move, we acquire new perspectives and insights; we mature, and our understanding of God, the world, our experience, our reading of the Bible, deepens, shifts, and develops. Whatever we began by understanding and saying about God needs to be challenged: with hindsight some of it seems not entirely accurate, some of it entirely inaccurate. Some of it needs to be nuanced, some of it abandoned, some of it filled out in once-surprising ways. After a while, we get used to this process, and can even anticipate it: once we've seen how far our understanding of God has changed as we've matured, we are able to realize that even our most ardently-held views might change further down the line. So one fruit of this realization is that we get to holding our own views more lightly: our very passion for God makes us more interested in other perspectives, and less defensive about our own.

Another reason, which goes hand-in-hand with the first, is that our relationship with God tends to lead us into growing appreciation of just how big God is. From Narnia to Dr Who's Tardis and Hermione Granger's handbag in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, we're familiar with the idea of things that are 'bigger on the inside than on the outside'; God turns out to be just like that. It was one of the early apophatic theologians, Gregory of Nyssa, who realized that, since God is infinite, the further you journey into encounter with God, the further you see there is to go. One result of this is the realization that our words and our claims are just too small to catch all that God is and means, and that we will never stop needing to go beyond them to find the divine overflow, the glory that leaks like a broken egg-yolk through the fingers of our language and concepts. Dionysius the Areopagite, another of the great early apophatic writers, tried to deal with this by tacking 'beyond' onto his statements, describing God as "the divinely-sovereign beyond-beingness, which is the beyond-existence of the beyond-goodness."<sup>ii</sup>

A third reason for saying 'no' to all the things we are otherwise inclined to say 'yes' to in regard to God comes from our growing understanding, not of God, but of ourselves. As we grow wiser, we tend to understand that the commandment about 'not worshipping graven images' isn't simply a restatement of the prohibition against worshipping 'other gods', but indicts our capacity to *make* a god for ourselves. We notice how easily, when we've had some wonderful spiritual experience or insight, we seize upon it and make a little throne for it in our hearts, worshipping our own vision of God instead of the God whose vision we were granted. The more glorious our vision, the more likely we are to deceive ourselves that we have 'got' God. Another of the great Christian spiritual writers, St Augustine of Hippo, bracingly insists, '*if you think you've understood it, then it isn't God*'.<sup>iii</sup> Other mystics challenge us to go beyond 'God' in order to find God.

Apophatic spirituality brings something of the spirit of a holy pantomime, then, to all our pious statements about God, with the familiar chants of 'oh yes he is', 'oh no he isn't'... In prayer

and worship and theology and practice, it calls us to a rhythm of saying and unsaying as we journey in faith.

Turning to the 'far end' of the apophatic spectrum, we shift focus from using negative words as correctives to positive ones, and focus instead on moving away from words altogether. Partly, this is about practices of prayer that privilege silence over speech, about habits of worship that open our hearts to hear God speak rather than maintaining an uninterrupted human holy monologue. Partly, it is about learning to encounter God in the trajectory of Jesus Christ: in transfigured materiality (the water of baptism, the bread and wine of communion, the faces of his 'little ones'), not in abstract words and concepts but in an incarnate life. To a very great extent, it is about the intimacy of love. Lovers sometimes express their love in measured statements, certainly, but these are never enough – they overflow into the babble of love-talk, a kind of cooing, into gesture, into silent communion. The people who practise apophatic spirituality are not seeking to know about God, but to know God in the oldest sense – to be intimate with divinity, to encounter the Holy One in a way that words will never capture.

So long as there is talk about God, the rules of grammar seem to apply: there are subjects and objects, propositions, 'parts of speech', speakers and their claims. Holy denial tackles the inappropriateness of all the propositions we tend to make about God; apophasis on this far side also points out the sublime idiocy of imagining that we can properly represent God *by a part of speech*. As Mark McIntosh reminded us, God isn't one of the things in the universe, but beyond, beneath, behind, throughout it as source and goal and ground and life. Or as the authors of Genesis and of the Fourth Gospel put it, God isn't one of the many things that may be spoken about, but the very saying that creates all things, including human speech. This being so, sentences such as 'God, our Heavenly Father, loves us' look like authentic speech but in some important way fail the test of meaning. There's enough meaning there, granted, to supply many lifetimes of spiritual growth; but the meaning leaks, and from some (in fact, many) perspectives there seems to be an ultimately-significant mismatch between our experience of God and our understanding of these words.

Apophatic spirituality doesn't stop, then, at capping statements about what God is with ones about what God is not. It doesn't stop, either, at pointing out the impropriety of our endeavouring to make divinity the *topic* of our speech. Finally, it points a finger at us, reminding us of Jesus' terrible challenge: you must *deny yourself* (Luke 9:23), and of John the Baptist's appropriation of it: *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3.30). In the end, the problem doesn't lie so much in the inadequacies of our words about God, as in the inadequacies of our hearts and imaginations; what we're called to deny includes ourselves as arbiters of truth. In Sarah Coakley's lovely phrase, apophasis invites us to 'practices of un-mastery'.<sup>iv</sup>

One frequent objection to apophasis turns on the idea of *revelation*. We can speak about God, it is argued, because God is revealed in the Bible, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and in 'the book of creation'. In fact, as McIntosh and many other theologians have demonstrated, a proper understanding of revelation goes hand in hand with an appreciation of apophasis. We do not have, and should not claim, a *complete* understanding of any of those revelations.

As the ending of John's Gospel beautifully demonstrates, there is no end to their meaning – and that is why we need to keep setting aside what we already know, in readiness to encounter the truth that is ever fresh and alive.

Apophatic spirituality is inseparably embedded in the theological wisdom of the early Christian centuries, remains vital in Eastern forms of Christianity, and though largely forgotten as a living spirituality in the West, is now becoming better known. Apophysis recognizes that following Jesus is a process of growth to maturity; it prompts us to seek the loving God who is 'ever ancient, ever new', rather than to cling to any particular formulation of faith; encourages us to welcome and learn from others with different perspectives on divine truth; and asks of each of us, not 'how true is your belief', but 'what are the fruits of your practice', and what have you encountered on the journey? It makes intellectual humility a spiritual virtue, values the desire to seek God's face above the claim to know God's will, and entertains the possibility that the Holy Spirit is still working on 'guiding us into all truth' (John 16.13). It is a pathway for seekers of burning bushes, living with unclenched hearts.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Mysteries of Faith* (Lanham, Chicago: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 49

<sup>ii</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, 593C (my translation).

<sup>iii</sup> Augustine, Sermon 52.

<sup>iv</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013) pp. 43 *et passim*

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015)

Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001)

JP Williams, *Seeking the God Beyond: A Beginner's Guide to Christian Apophatic Spirituality* (London: SCM, 2018)

Some of the foundational texts of the apophatic tradition – available in a range of editions (search online for more details):

Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as Pseudo-Dionysius), *The Mystical Theology*  
Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*; sermons and commentary *On the Song of Songs*

Meister Eckhart, sermons and commentaries

Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance; On the Hidden God*

St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*

*The Cloud of Unknowing* (author unknown)