

On the Two Ways of Knowledge in Lossky's Mystical Theology

Sub-Dn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian

Dionysius explains that there are two possible theological approaches to the knowledge of God. One of these ways is known as *cataphatic*. This is a positive theology which proceeds by affirmations. The other is known as *apophatic*. This theology is negative and proceeds by negations. The cataphatic approach leads to limited knowledge of God and it is an imperfect approach. The perfect approach is the apophatic. This is the only way befitting God, who is unknowable by His very nature. Its end is total ignorance. All knowledge seeks to know that which is, but God is beyond all that exists. In order to contemplate Him, one must first deny all that is inferior to Him (*The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 25).

If one can recognize God in His contemplation he can be sure that does not in fact see God but rather something intelligible and something inferior to God (*ibid*, 25). It is only by unknowing (*agnosia*) that one comes to know Him who is above all knowledge. Through negations one goes up from inferior ideas of being to the highest. Through the darkness of complete ignorance one draws near to the unknowable One. Lossky summarizes this point stating, "For even as light, and especially abundance of light, renders darkness invisible; even so the knowledge of created things, and especially excess of knowledge, destroys the ignorance which is the only way by which one can attain to God in Himself" (*ibid*, 25).

The scholastic West, as a result of moving Dionysius' distinction between affirmative and negative theology into the realm of dialectic (the art of examining ideas logically through questioning), viewed these two approaches as an antinomy (a contradiction between two laws). St. Thomas Aquinas thus reduced the two ways of Dionysius by combining them into one and used negative theology to serve as a corrective to affirmative theology. But for the author of the *Aeropagitica*, there is no antinomy between these two theologies and there is no need for a synthesis of them. In fact the two should not be put on the same level. Dionysius says repeatedly that apophatic theology surpasses cataphatic (*ibid*, 26).

In apophatic theology, one must renounce his senses and his reason -all that is ascertained through the senses or understanding. This is the only way to be able to reach perfect ignorance and union with Him who is absolute transcendence and utterly unknowable. Rather than this being a process of dielectric as proposed by the West, it is seen to be something far different: it is a profound process of purification (or *katharais*). As Lossky writes, "One must abandon all that is impure and even all that is pure... one must scale the most sublime heights of sanctity leaving all behind. It is only thus one may penetrate into the darkness wherein He -who is beyond all-makes His dwelling" (*ibid*, 27). Thus negative theology is a way towards mystical union with God -who remains to us incomprehensible.

Conversely, the function of cataphatic or affirmative theology can be seen as the theology of the "divine names" which is manifested in the order of creation. This way is not one like the apophatic which leads to union. Rather it is a way which comes down towards us. As Lossky writes, "It is seen as a 'ladder of theophanies' or manifestations of God in creation" (*ibid*, 39). It is a way which can be followed in two opposite directions. Firstly, God comes down to us in His divine energies which manifest Himself to us. Secondly we also go towards him through the

unions in which he remains incomprehensible in His nature. The greatest and most perfect theophany or revelation of God in the world was the incarnation of the Word (which retains its apophatic character). Dionysius states, “In the humanity of Christ the Super-essential was manifested in human substance without ceasing to be hidden after this manifestation...” (*Epist. III, P.G.; Lossky, 39*).

But the affirmations which relate to the sacred humanity of Christ can also be seen as among the most pre-eminent negations. Lossky explains, “The ladder of cataphatic theology which discloses the divine names drawn above all, from Holy Scripture, is a series of steps upward which the soul can mount to contemplation” (*ibid, 40*). These are images or ideas which guide us and prepare our faculties for the contemplation for the One who is beyond our understanding. At each step in this ascent as one encounters loftier images or ideas, he must ensure he guards against making of them an idol (*ibid, 40*). Through cataphatic theology one can contemplate the divine beauty itself, i.e., God as He manifests Himself in creation. Lossky explains that beginning with cataphasis, it is natural for one to gradually go on to apophasis, “Speculation gradually gives place to contemplation, knowledge to experience; for, in casting off the concepts which shackle the spirit, the apophatic disposition reveals boundless horizons of contemplation at each step of positive theology.”

All that can be said cataphatically about God still does not reveal His nature but rather the things that relate to His nature. God cannot be classed with other existing things. This is not to say He has no existence but rather that He is above all existence. All forms of knowledge pertain to that which exists. Since He is above all existence, He is also above all knowledge. Thus Lossky concludes, “There are different levels in theology, each appropriate to the differing capacities of the human understanding which reach up to the mysteries of God ” (*ibid, 41*).