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THE GREEK RELIGIOUS APOPHATISM

The Greek genius showed a preference for tragedies over comedies in presenting the reality of human life, because the vision of the hero standing up for his convictions and ideals against all odds helped to reveal the ideals and principles in their sublime and naked reality more effectively than all the ridicule that could be heaped on the mistakes of men through their comic caricature. Similarly, in spiritual life, the negative method held a fascination for the Greek religious thinkers over the affirmative approach. All that could be affirmed comes more or less within the grasp of human imagination, while what lies beyond human capacities can be indicated only through negation. Hence the Christian theologians and spiritual writers attached great importance to apophatic theology in describing the object of supernatural religious experience. But theirs was no empty negativism, but an apophatism that was strongly affirmative in meaning.

The Greek Philosophical Background

The background for Christian apophatism was provided by the pioneers of Greek classical philosophy like Parmenides and Plato. Parmenides, who as W. W. Jaeger affirms[1] was the initiator of strict logical thinking in the Greek tradition, tells us that he received his instruction on Being from the Goddess, when after having been driven "on the famous highway which bears a man who has knowledge through the cities", he is led by the daughters of the Sun to the Palace of Night. He makes a sharp distinction between the phenomenal knowledge obtained in the broad daylight of affirmation and the true knowledge of being gained in the darkness of the night.

Plato's philosophy is mostly cataphatic, since for him the source of all knowledge is the Good, which is the Sun of the intelligible world. But, all the same, he recognizes the paradox, that the Good which is

1. W. W. Jaeger. *Paideia*: *The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. I, (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 173.

"not only the author of all things known, but of their being and essence", "is not itself an essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power."[2] The real problem with the affirmative method, which proceeds by the weaving of ideas, in attaining transcendental realities is placed in the mouth of Parmenides in the dialogue named after him : If forms do exist they are simply a duplication of things and they in turn call for other forms for their understanding going in a never-ending series ; but without admitting the forms and their permanent character human discourse will not have any significance.[3] Actually, this paradox is left unresolved by Plato. The obvious philosophical point implied in this line of argumentation is that the transcendental cannot be placed by the side of and additional to the phenomenal ; the reality of the latter has first to be denied to affirm the reality of the former.

Plotinus was the one who, in his effort to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, clearly formulated the negative method. With Plato he agreed that physical beauty, limited as it is, "is beauty borrowed", a mere shadow and a reflection of spiritual beauty. But on the lines of Aristotelian hylemorphism he said that the beauty of the body was received from the soul, the formal and active principle of human nature.[4] Hence, denying the independent reality of physical beauty one should enter into oneself to contemplate the beauty of the soul, and from there by a second negation ascend to the World Soul and to the Intelligence, denying which again "one stands before the supreme principle, providing the mind free access to the krowledge of all."[4]

> Sometimes I wake up from slumber of the body to return to myself ; and turning my attention from external things to what is within me, I behold the most marvelous beauty. I then fully believe that I have a superior destiny. I live the highest life and am at one with the divinity. Established there, my activity raises me above all the other intelligible beings.[5]

This interiorism of Plotinus is, according to Émile Bréhier, an "abuse of Greek rationalism and its termination" since here intelligence is in communion with itself, sees only itself in its own universality. But even at the height of intelligence Plotinus' approach

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2. *The Republic*, 509 b.
3. *Parmenides*, 132 a–133 a ; 135 a–e.
4. *Enneads* V, ix, 2 ; I, vi, 8.
5. *Ibid.*,, IV, viii, 1.

to the One is negative : The absolute and ultimate reality has to be One. " Not a one, a thing is not. No army, no choir, no flock exists except it be one."[6] But this One " has nothing else to be in ; so It is in nothing at all, and therefore in this sense nowhere. Where then are other things? In it. It is therefore not far from the other, nor in them, and there is nothing which contains It, but It contains all things."[7] The One is beyond all multiplicity and hence beyond being itself ; for being is what stands out (ek-sists) distinct from and by the side of others. Hence the One can be characterized only as non-being.[8]

The Platonism of the Christian Fathers

The one who formed a sort of link between Platonic philosophy and Judeo-Christian thought and thus acted as a sort of pioneer and forerunner for the Greek Christian theologians was Philo, a Jewish thinker of Alexandria who, coming long before Plotinus, made an effort to reconcile Hebraic religious thought with the fashionable Greek religious philosophy of his times. His basic assumption was that truth, whether revealed in the Bible or attained by Greek thinking, was one. He used Greek philosophical concepts to get behind the anthropomorphism of a literal reading of the Bible and giving an allegorical interpretation of the Biblical narratives, identified the creative Word of God with the Stoic Logos, the locus of the divine ideas. For him Moses entering the dark cloud with God was indicative of the apophatic approach to understand the divine reality beyond human images and concepts.

The Christian Platonism of St. Gregory of Nyssa

One of the first to systematize Christian theology on Platonic lines was St. Gregory of Nyssa, who took up the task of Christian preaching after a thorough schooling in Greek philosophy. Though he uses freely Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Stoic and Philonian terminology, he makes his distinctive Christian meaning very clear. For him the human soul is not essentially divine as for Plato and Plotinus, but only a creature stamped with an image of God, a free gift of divine grace. The mark of all created beings is the capacity to change and the soul is on its eschatological pilgrimage. He describes the soul's

6. *Ibid.*, VI, ix, 1.
7. *Ibid.*, V, v, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, VI, ix, 1 ; III, viii, 11.

detachment from the world using the Stoic term *apatheia* ; but it is not simply the fruit of human efforts as for the Stoics, but an integral part of the supernatural life communicated by God, which arms us against troubles and difficulties arising from the senses.

In his Platonic thinking, Gregory does not ascribe much importance to the cycle of creation, fall and redemption presented in the Bible. For him it is simply a symbolic account of the subtle and complex relationship of man with God. Man is the image of God and hence a purely intelligible, incorporeal and immortal being lacking in no perfection in the original ideal of creation. But in actuality this image is tarnished through bodily existence and man's task is to cleanse this image. Through the Incarnation the Word of God identifies Himself with man's fallen condition and starts the journey back to that state in the end when all men will be one man in Christ.

The distinctive point in Gregory's apophatism is that it is not a transitional element simply to be replaced by a direct contemplation of the Good or the One as in Plato and Plotinus. Spiritual life is a search for the incomprehensible *ousia* of the divinity. But at each stage of this search, what was considered the ideal and goal of that search, on arrival turns out to be a disappointment ; it appears merely as the beginning of a new ascent. Even the supernatural knowledge, which is almost like the vault of heaven, is only the first step in a further ascent to the beyond. The whole reality of supernatural life is given to us in Baptism ; but the realization of this death and resurrection with Christ has to be attained in different stages, first through death to sin and passions which culminates in a night of the passions ; then by death to natural modes of knowledge both sensitive and conceptual, leading up to the contemplation or *theoria* ; and finally to mystical life, which itself is a whole world of deaths and resurrections. These deaths and resurrections bring the soul closer to God who inhabits its inmost centre. But God remains ever inaccessible and incomprehensible, howsoever close the soul may progress. For, deification of the soul is not any identity with God The image is always other than and less than its archetype ; the distance between the Creator and the creature is always infinite.

As Gregory following the example of Philo interprets Moses' entry into darkness with God,[9] the ever continuing negativity of spiritual experience is not empty but supremely positive : The darkness of

9. *Life of Moses*, P. G. 44, 401 B—408 D.

Sinai stands for a place of Revelation. It is not a vision of intelligence, but, yet, it is a vision of the invisible. The paradox of this darkness is that it is a mode of human knowledge, but its principle is not the human mind, but the Holy Spirit, who is inaccessible to other men. First of all the word "darkness" teaches us that the more the spirit approaches contemplation the more it realizes that the divine nature is invisible.[10]

Gregory exhorts us to seek, like Moses on Mount Sinai, to enter the darkness of the contemplation of the Mysteries.[11] This vision in darkness is an experience which he attributes to several saints. Thus about St. Basil he tells us : "Often we saw him to be in the darkness where God is found. In fact, the inspiration of the Spirit made him understand what is unknowable to others in a way as to seem that he were in the heart of the cloud where the Word of God is hidden."[12] He describes St. Gregory the Wonderworker "as a mountain that had the height of the desires for the truths of faith, as well as the darkness of the view inaccessible to others."[13] For him the apophatic experience is like the view from the top of a high mountain : It is a great spectacle from the top ; from below it is all clouds and darkness. As Gregory says, commenting on the entry of Moses into darkness with God, there is a certain contradiction in the whole experience : the initial theophany is all light. But it is in darkness that God really appears. The knowledge by which the Word instructs us in faith is light at the beginning, since it is opposed to impiety which is darkness. But the more the soul advances in the greater knowledge of the divine reality, the more it realizes that the divine nature is invisible.[14] Hence the true knowledge of God is in not knowing since He in every aspect transcends all knowledge through His incomprehensibility which is like darkness. Gregory often speaks of this divine incomprehensibility as a luminous darkness.[15]

Thus the term "darkness" indicates a break with the area of ordinary knowledge. Faith shows us the field beyond, which reason cannot reach. It provides no intellectual understanding ; but it has everything else, like the intimate relation to a Person, sense of

10. *P.G.* 44, 376 D–377A.
11. *P.G.* 44, 65C.
12. *P.G.* 44, 812 C.
13. *P.G.* 46, 913 B.
14. *P.G.* 44, 376C–377A ; see 1000D–1001 A.
15. *P.G.* 44, 377 A–B.

immediate presence, and His divine inhabitation towards which faith tends. The region is quite unfamiliar to the soul, which, therefore, tends to return to the field of its familiar concepts. But this new knowledge is characterized by a feeling of the presence of the divine Person, and so, it is a divine night. Once the soul has gone beyond the sensible, 'it is enveloped by a divine night, in which the Spouse approaches it, but does not appear... But He communicates to the soul a feeling of His presence, which escapes all clear knowledge, since He is hidden by the invisibility of his nature."[16] This experience is "dark" not only because it is situated in a field inaccessible to ordinary knowledge, but principally because it falls far short of its divine object. Hence the gift of grace cannot be compared to a torrential rain but only to a sprinkling at the tip of the mind. The divine Truth just wets the spirit through tender and obscure thoughts.[17]

The Neo-Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius

The Syrian cleric of around the 5th century A.D. who wrote under the name of the famous Areopagite convert of St. Paul and exerted great influence for several centuries with the authority of St. Dionysius on an equal level with St. Augustine, was more faithfully Plotinian than Gregory. His writings contain too little that is specifically Christian for him to be acknowledged a Christian thinker. He follows the conceptual scheme of Proclus, the neo-Platonist writer, presenting One, Intelligence and Soul as a graded series of entities. For him all creation is a theophany and God Himself is inapprehensible and incomprehensible though we can speak of Him in terms of creatures. Thus "Good" is applied to God "in a transcendental manner, calling the supreme Divine Existence itself Goodness in a sense that separates it from the whole creation." He is goodness by existence. "Now if the Good is above all things (as indeed it is) Its Formless Nature produces all-form ; and in It alone Not-Being is an excess of Being, and Lifelessness an excess of Life and Its Mindless state is an excess of wisdom, and all the attributes of the Good we express in a transcendent manner by negative images. And if it is reverend to say so, even what is not desires the all-transcendent Good and struggles itself, by its denial of all things, to find its best in the Good which verily transcends all being."[18]

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16. *P.G.* 44, 1001 B–C.
17. *P.G.* 44, 1004 A.
18. *Divine Names* IV, 3.

Dionysius recognizes two types of negation, the empty negativity of evil which indicates the absence of all good, and the negativity of the super-essential Essence which is the negation of all that is finite and limited. But a unique emphasis of the Areopagite, of which St. Thomas Aquinas makes capital use in his confrontation with the Augustinianism of his day, is that he does not consider the hierarchy of beings as a mere "circulation of the Good" in the Neo-Platonist fashion : "Each thing has its own definite nature according to which it participates in the divine Good" ; the divine Good communicates Itself in such a way that each thing has its own proper nature and proper faculties and actions through which it actively participates in the divine. Like the sun the divine Good "sends forth upon all things according to their receptive powers, the rays of its undivided Goodness. Through these all spiritual Beings and faculties and activities began."[19] The rays of the divine sun constitute each thing in its proper nature, and though the divine Goodness is their ground and the final goal of their desire they have to attain it through their own proper powers and activities.

The Double Role of Negation

In the creature's approach to the divine Good negation has a double role : On the one hand, on account of the finitude and imperfection of the created intellect the mind has to leap out of its own limitations in order to arrive at an understanding of the divine reality. On the other hand, the intrinsic character of the divine Good implies the negation of all ideas and concepts. The pure Platonizers among the ancient writers placed the accent on the first mode of negation : we have to approach God through the negative method on account of the imperfection of the human mind. Origen following the lead of Philo tried to reconcile the Christian cycle of creation, fall and redemption, with the Platonic vision of the soul's entrapment in the prison of the body and its gradual rise to the contemplation of the ideas and of the Good. He conceived a double creation : the first creation was a heavenly realm of incorporeal spirits created to contemplate and worship God, with a capacity for free choice. But they grew weary with this spiritual vision and fell, some becoming angels, others men, and finally, others evil spirits. Since they could not raise themselves back to their pristine condition by themselves, in a second creation God produced matter, and the divine Logos taking the flesh initiated a process of redemption that would be completed only with

19. *Divine Names* IV, 1.

the return of all beings including even the devils to their pristine purity. This Origenist model was condemned by the Christian Fathers of the Church as denying the real nature of man and the real meaning of the Incarnation. But the essential lines of Origenist mysticism continued to dominate Eastern spirituality.

Evagrius, a Pontic deacon, through his treatise *De Oratione* taught the Egyptian monks a method of prayer based purely on Neo-Platonic lines. Even though his errors were corrected by the Cappadocian Fathers and St.Maximus, the Confessor, his ideal of a purely intellectual vision of the invisible Godhead was clandestinely handed down in Eastern monastic tradition.[20] Even St. Gregory of Nyssa attributes such a vision to Moses : " Moses went into forty years " exile from the society of man and living alone with himself, applied his vision, not allowing himself to be disturbed in tranquillity, to the contemplation of invisible things." [21]

In his *Mystical Theology* Ps. Dionysius places the emphasis on this epistemological negativism. He exhorts Timothy :

> In the earnest exercise of mystic contemplation, thou leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things in this world of nothingness or in that world of being, and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou strain so far as thou mayest towards an union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of that Divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.[22]

For the Good Cause of all things is eloquent in its silence, and Its super-essential Essence "is revealed in Its naked truth" only to those who pass beyond the contraries of fair and foul, and even the infused ideas.

But the main concern of Ps. Dionysius is about the inner reality of God Himself. The basic fact is the infinity of God cannot be placed by the side of creatures as something additional to them, but implies their negation. A God who is merely outside of and addi-

20. See I. Hausher. " L'hésichasme, étude de spiritualité ", *Or. Chr. Per.* 22 (1956), 5–40 ; 247–85.
21. *P.G.* 44, 456 C
22. *Mystical Theology* I, trs. C. E. Rolt, (London : SPCK, 1977), pp. 191–92.

tional to the finite beings cannot be infinite and cannot be God. The finite beings from their side immutably fixed in their self-identity, tending forward to the attainment of their proper goals and moved by a longing for the Beautiful and Good can only see its Ray and be united only to the beginningless and endless illuminations of the Beautiful and Good.[23] All the attributes of the Good have to be expressed in a transcendent manner through negative terms : " while it possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the universal Cause) yet in a stricter sense it does not possess them, since it transcends them all."[24] God is not only unknowable, but also beyond the unknowable.

Christian Negative Theology

The Christian spiritual writers, though inspired by Neo-Platonic mystical ideas earnestly tried to maintain the infinite distance between the creatureliness of man and the transcendence of God. For them this gap was bridged only by the Incarnation of Christ and the divine grace communicated by Him. " Man remains wholly man in soul and body," writes Maximus the Confessor, "and by grace becomes wholly God in soul and body."[25] Their theological statements about God are mostly negative. According to St. Cyril of Jerusalem we cannot say anything properly about God, whose nature is known only to Himself, but only as much as man can understand and as much as our weakness can bear it. We frankly confess that we do not have exact knowledge about Him. For the great knowledge about God is to confess our ignorance. Even though the Bible says that the angels of children see the face of God, it only means that the angels see the face of God as much as they understand and not as God ; the archangels too see as much as they can. Only the Holy Spirit with the Son can see God as He is. In the treatise on the Trinity St. Hilary of Poitiers tells us : " God's word about God is beyond definition. It placed the names of natures as Father, Son, Holy Spirit. But it is outside the meaning of speech, outside the intention of the senses, outside the conception of intelligence ; whatever is sought beyond is not enunciated, not attained, not held."[26] When the Eunomians try to explain the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father as perfect similitude in order to get out of the Nicean definition against Arianism, St. Basil's answer is : " We cannot say about the Son that He is similar

23. *Divine Names* IV, 8–10.
24. *Myst. Theol.* I.
25. *Ambigua.* PG. 91, 1088C.
26. *De Trinit.* 2, 7, 6.

or dissimilar to the Father, since similarity and dissimilarity are about qualities known by reasoning."

In fact, as Maximus the Confessor points out, the definitions of Ecumenical Councils and Church documents do not touch central questions of supernatural life such as salvation and the deification of souls, but are mostly about conceptual formulations of certain points of faith like the two natures in Christ and the consubstantiality of the three divine Persons of the Trinity. This shows that true "theological mystagogy" transcends the dogmas; for, "every word of God written for men according to the present age is a forerunner of the more perfect word to be revealed by Him in an unwritten way in the Spirit."[27] In the opinion of St. John Damascene it is not enough for theology to remain with positive descriptions or definitions, it has also to know the relation between "the things that are spoken and the things that are ineffable, the things that are known and the things that are unknowable."[28] Theology has to be apophatic not only because of the limitations of the human understanding, but especially because of the transcendence of its object, God. As Damacene himself explains, God "does not belong to the order of existing things, being above existence...so that if all forms of knowledge relate to existing things then that which is above knowing is also above essence.[29] Thus silence is not a repudiation of theologizing but rather another path to knowledge.

The Mystical Apophatism of Simeon the New Theologian

St. Simeon (949–1022) regarded as the new theologian in comparison with St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory of Nyssa, brought a new insight into apophatic theology from the point of view of Christian praxis. He had to fight, on the one hand, against the speculative approach of theologians like Photius, Michael Psellos and John Italos, who used Aristotelian categories to interpret faith and attempted to give greater autonomy to reason in articulating the mysteries of Revelation, and on the other hand, against people like Archbishop Stephen of Nicomedia and monks who had grown worldly with the accumulation of wealth and the gaining of social respectability, both of whom placed the emphasis on ecclesiastical authority and external organization, over against the charisms of the Spirit

27. *P.G.* 90, 845; see *PG* 91, 1252.
28. *De Fide Orth.*, 2.
29. *Ibid.*, 4.

advocated by simple monks like Simeon. Against his adversaries, Simeon's single-handed crusade was to cry out that Christian faith was primarily life and praxis, and that theological formulations and external expressions fell far short of the reality they tried to represent. Hence he placed primary emphasis in theology on a mystical apophatic approach to the experience of God immanently present to the individual.

This practical apophatism had two levels. First on the individual level one had to recognize one's total inadequacy before divine grace and ascetically deny oneself to affirm the super-eminent reality of God's gift in faith. Simeon's *Discourses* and *Hymns* set forth this individual self-abnegation beautifully. For example in Hymn 25 he writes :

> I remained seated in the middle of the darkness, I know,
> but, while I was there surrounded by darkness,
> You appeared as light, illuminating me completely from Your total light,
> And I became light in the night, I who was found in the midst of darkness.
> Neither the darkness extinguished Your light completely,
> nor did the light dissipate the visible darkness,
> but they were together, yet completely separate,
> without confusion, far from each other, surely not at all mixed,
> except in the same spot where they filled everything.

It is over against the self-effacing darkness of the soul that the divine light shines best.

On the common universal plane Simeon's basic question at issue with his adversaries was " What is true theology ? " Here in his theological treatises he insists on the doctrine of Revelation found in Scripture : Divine self-disclosure found in the Bible can be understood only through an apophatism or a knowing by not knowing with man's rational powers alone. On the other hand a clear understanding of the gift of faith is reached through the gift of infused contemplation given to the simple and humble of heart by the Holy Spirit.

The Double Negation of Gregory of Palamas

One who pushed Greek apophatism to extreme limits and tried to transcend it completely was Gregory of Palamas, who lived in the 14th century. Two forms of apophatism proposed by different theologians was at the source of the Byzantine controversies of the 14th century.

For some it was all a matter of human experience : On account of the weakness of the human mind, what it could not attain through affirmation it had to reach by negation. But for Palamas and his school this conventional apophatism of the Neo-Platonic tradition was not apophatic enough. One has to recognize that God transcends not only affirmation but also negation. Hence for reaching God the negative way is not enough, since it is limited to comparing beings to God in order to recognize the unknowability of God, and is not, therefore, anything more than the result of a knowledge of beings. Although negative theology draws closer to God than positive theology, it still remains rather a detachment from things than a knowledge of God. So the apophatic method denies itself and points beyond itself to true contemplation : Contemplation is the result of the apophatic detachment, but it is not itself a detachment or negation. It is not an affirmation either. According to Palamas it is a union and divinization which happens mystically and inexpressibly by the grace of God after detachment.[30] Hence true vision is a negation of negation itself, which consists in an encounter with the invisible and transcendent God :

> In the very vision there is something which surpasses vision, by undergoing negation and not by conceiving it. Just as the act of undergoing and seeing divine things differs from cataphatic theology and is superior to it, so does the act of undergoing negation in spiritual vision, negation linked to the transcendence of the object, differ from negative theology and is superior to it.[31]

There is an apparent contradiction between two facts of religious experience : God in his super-essential essence is unattainable to both cataphatic and apophatic theologies. On the other hand, the saints become divinized, or as Palamas put it, "were uncreated by grace." While Ps. Dionysius, who is almost silent about Christ, left the paradox unresolved, Palamas finds the solution in Christology : "No man has ever seen God ; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known." (John 1, 18). Through Revelation in Jesus Christ the Transcendent comes down to our level of experience and the Unknowable makes Himself known. The divine grace given to us in Jesus Christ raises us to the divine level of experience and the complete and unadulterated existence in us of Jesus brings God to our own level.[32]

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30. Gregory Palamas, *Triad for the Defense of Hesychasts* I, 3, 17.
31. *Triad*, II, 3, 26, See John Meyendorff. *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trs, George Lawrence, (London : The Faith Press, 1964), p. 207,
32. John Meyendorff, *l.c.*, pp. 209–210.

The real difference between Dionysius and Gregory of Palamas is that while for the former theology is experience, for Palamas theology and experience are different. For the Areopagite negative theology is the negation of all concepts introducing one to the blinding light of the divine Sun. According to Palamas, on the other hand, even negative theology is only a word ; contemplation is something more than theology.[33] Similarly, also prayer is an experience in which a believer deals directly with God, whose utter unknowability is not an obstacle but a dynamic factor in relating oneself with the supernatural world.[34] Thus, in a sense, Palamas took negative theology out of its earlier Neo-Platonist context in order to base it in the Christian doctrine of divine Revelation.

The Uniqueness of Greek Apophatism

Even in the effort of Palamas to correct Ps. Dionysius, the unique character of the Greek negative theology stands out, and that is its positive content. Buddhist negation leads only to an emptiness, the blowing out of *Nirvāṇa*. All analogies for the world of unreality proposed by Buddhist thinkers like Nagarjuna, the bubble, the mirage, the wave, the reflected image, the dream and the rest show that when this world of concrete experience is denied there is nothing left in its place ; they do not point to anything deeper behind them or beyond them. When a flame goes out nobody asks where it went. We are left with an empty emptiness, about which nothing can be said : Wha is denied is not the sign of something behind it.

The "*Neti, neti*" of Hindu negation also does not tell us anything about what it points to. In order to see what is being pointed out one has to look away from the pointing finger ; but the finger itself will not tell us anything about what has to be seen directly. The Hegelian negation and the negative theology of the West in general is typical in its idea of a never-ending progress : Our affirmations have to be negated in order to state that what we have grasped now is only a rung in a ladder that extends to infinity. Even though it may be our best effort for the moment, it has to be transcended in order to go up higher in the never-ending spiral.

Greek apophatism, on the other hand, begins with a sense of the incomprehensible fullness. As Plato's analogy of the Sun clearly shows, one closes one's eyes against the sun not to deny it but only to acknowledge that it is the fullness which we can never fully comprehend.

33. *Triad II*, 3, 49. 34. *Triad II*, 3, 35.

Like the people in Plato's cave, ordinary persons often remain happy with borrowed ideas and opinions, which are like shadows. These have to be denied in order to turn them around so that they can face the fire that produced the shadows, look at real things and form their own views about them, and finally see them in the light of the sun, which is the image of the Good, the source of all knowledge and life. For Plotinus too the negative approach is emphatically affirmative : one has to deny all ideas regarding the One, because the attribution to it of any idea like truth or goodness will only detract from its fullness. Ps. Dionysius whose Christian credentials were based more on his false identification with the Areopagite than on his doctrines, tried to synthesize Neo-Platonist negativism with the Aristotelian idea of the integrity of particular natures, which tended to their natural goals through their own powers and activities.

But the focus of Christian apophatism was Christ himself, who on the one hand made the divine available to us in human form and, on the other, showed the inadequacy of all philosophical conceptions in approaching the divine. For Christian theologians apophatism represented a religious attitude with regard to the mystery of God, which enabled them to transcend all concepts and every sphere of philosophical enquiry, recognize the limitations of ecclesiastical authority, and acknowledge that even the Bible presented more an anthropology of man before God than an ontology of God himself. These three components of the system of traditional religious authority, namely, Scripture, ecclesiastical Magisterium and philosophy have to be transcended by reason of their own content : the Bible is God's word, but expressed in the words of man. The Magisterium of the Church is not any oracle but more a negative and directive guidance guarding against human error ; and philosophy is a system of human concepts and principles. This persuaded Christian theologians to refuse to pry into the divine mysteries and to concentrate on what could be known, in order to emphasize that God who could not be known in Himself is to be known from his effects. As St. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, Christ's Cross which is foolishness to the philosophers is the basis of Christian wisdom. His self-emptying obedience to the Father in the death on the cross, is the radical basis of Christian negative theology. But it does not remain in its negation, but naturally leads to an integral experience of God in Christ, in whom the fullness of the divinty is present to us in bodily form.