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0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation

Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner

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## SILENCE AND THE WORD

Negative theology or apophasis – the idea that God is best identified in terms of ‘absence’, ‘otherness’, ‘difference’ – has been influential in modern Christian thought, resonating as it does with secular notions of negation developed in recent continental philosophy. Apophasis also has a strong intellectual history dating back to the early Church Fathers. *Silence and the Word* both studies the history of apophasis and examines its relationship with contemporary secular philosophy. Leading Christian thinkers explore in their own way the extent to which the concept of the apophatic illumines some of the deepest doctrinal structures of Christian faith and of Christian self-understanding, both in terms of its historical and contemporary situatedness, showing how a dimension of negativity has characterised not only traditional mysticism but most forms of Christian thought over the years.

OLIVER DAVIES is Reader in Philosophical Theology in the University of Wales and has written a number of studies of Christian mystical writers, including *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (1991). The first volume of his Systematic Theology appeared as *A Theology of Compassion* (2001), and a second volume, *On the Creativity of God*, is currently under preparation.

DENYS TURNER is the Norris-Hulse Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Cambridge and former H. G. Wood Professor at the University of Birmingham. He is the author of *On the Philosophy of Karl Marx* (1969), *Marxism and Christianity* (1983) and *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge, 1995). He is currently working on a book on Thomas Aquinas and the doctrine of God.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Silence and the Word: negative theology and incarnation / editors  
 Oliver Davies and Denys Turner

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 81718 8

i. Negative theology – Christianity – Congresses. 1. Davies, Oliver, 1956–  
 ii. Turner, Denys, 1942–

BT83.585 .S55 2002 230 – dc21 2001052404

ISBN 0 521 81718 8 hardback

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*In memory of Herbert McCabe*

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καί ὡς διὰ θυσιαστηρίου τοῦ νοῦς, τὴν ἐν ἀδύτοις πολυῦμνητον  
τῆς ἀφανοῦς καὶ ἀγνώστου μεγαλοφωνίας σιγῆν τῆς θεότητος,  
δι' ἄλλης λάλου τε καὶ πολυφθόγγου σιγῆς προσκαλούμενον.

Through the altar of the mind he summons the silence of the unseen  
and unknown call of the deity much hymned in the innermost  
sanctuaries, by another silence that speaks, rich in tone.

Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogy*

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## *Notes on contributors*

OLIVER DAVIES is Reader in Philosophical Theology in the University of Wales and has written a number of studies of Christian mystical writers, including *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (SPCK 1991). The first volume of his Systematic Theology appeared as *A Theology of Compassion* (SCM Press 2001), and a second volume, *On the Creativity of God*, is currently under preparation.

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HERBERT MCCABE joined the Order of Preachers after studying philosophy at the University of Manchester. From 1964–7 and 1970–9 he was editor of *New Blackfriars*. He lectured in philosophy and theology at Blackfriars, Oxford, and in the Department of Theology and

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Religious Studies at the University of Bristol. In 1987 he published *God Matters* (Geoffrey Chapman). Herbert McCabe died on 28 June 2001.

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ROWAN WILLIAMS is Bishop of Monmouth and the Archbishop of Wales. He has been Dean of Clare College, Cambridge and Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford. His recent publications include *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Darton, Longman and Todd 1987), *Teresa of Avila* (Geoffrey Chapman 1991), *Sergii Bulgakov* (1999) and *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell 2000).

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## *Preface*

This book originated in a colloquium that was held at the University of Birmingham in Spring 1999. The contributors represented different fields of interest in Christian theology, but a common theme in their work was an engagement with what is often termed ‘spirituality’, that is to say with Christianity as an existential and dialectical religion. There was a further consensus that the dimension of negativity, or apophasis, which is most often associated with the canon of Christian mystical texts, belongs also to mainstream Christianity and can be found in theological works not normally considered to be of a ‘mystical’ kind. In the resulting volume, each contributor is exploring in his or her own way the extent to which the concept of the apophatic illumines some of the deepest doctrinal structures of Christian faith, and of Christian self-understanding in terms both of its historical and contemporary situatedness. It is hoped that the resulting conversations between contributors will reach out beyond the ranks of those who ordinarily study the ‘mystical’ and will creatively engage those for whom such concerns may appear limited or marginal.

The editors wish to express their thanks to the Department of Theology at the University of Birmingham for offering financial support for the original colloquium, as they do to Kevin Taylor and the staff of Cambridge University Press for their kind and efficient collaboration in the production of this volume. Most of all however the editors wish to express real gratitude to the contributors themselves for their generous, inventive and whole-hearted engagement with the topic, and for giving such solid flesh to the insubstantial outline of what seemed an interesting idea.

The Select Bibliography at the end of the volume contains items which are repeatedly used by contributors and those which touch more generally on the nature of the apophatic, with regard also to Christian

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doctrine and culture. It is neither a complete listing of bibliographical material referred to in the chapters nor is it intended to survey the extant literature on Christian mystical texts.

OLIVER DAVIES  
DENYS TURNER