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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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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

In memory of Herbert McCabe

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0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation
Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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*

Contents

<i>Notes on contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction <i>Oliver Davies and Denys Turner</i>	1
1 Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason <i>Denys Turner</i>	11
2 The quest for a place which is ‘not-a-place’: the hiddenness of God and the presence of God <i>Paul S. Fiddes</i>	35
3 The gift of the Name: Moses and the burning bush <i>Janet Martin Soskice</i>	61
4 Aquinas on the Trinity <i>Herbert McCabe</i>	76
5 <i>Vere tu es Deus absconditus</i> : the hidden God in Luther and some mystics <i>Bernard McGinn</i>	94
6 The deflections of desire: negative theology in trinitarian disclosure <i>Rowan Williams</i>	115
7 The formation of mind: Trinity and understanding in Newman <i>Mark A. McIntosh</i>	136
8 ‘In the daylight forever?’: language and silence <i>Graham Ward</i>	159

Cambridge University Press
0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation
Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Apophesis and the Shoah: where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz? <i>David F. Ford</i>	185
10	Soundings: towards a theological poetics of silence <i>Oliver Davies</i>	201
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	223
	<i>Index</i>	226

Cambridge University Press
 0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation
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 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

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Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press
0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation
Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii

Preface

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