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0521817188 - Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation

Edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner

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Introduction

Oliver Davies and Denys Turner

The classical Christian apophatic tradition, which is made available to us principally in a number of Greek patristic and Western medieval texts, feeds into three distinct currents of contemporary thinking. In the first place, it appears to offer a point of contact with the pervasive mood of atheistic secularism in modern society. Language which pivots around denials about God and a rhetoric of absence seems meaningful in the context of a widespread scepticism about traditional religious beliefs and values in a way that the increasingly exasperated or despairing repetition of kerygmatic affirmations does not. But it can seem defeatist, at best, to preach a God of the gaps to half-empty pews rather than a God who is Lord and Creator of all. Secondly, and more challengingly, negative theology can be used creatively to explore affinities with an intellectual environment in which negation – as difference, absence, otherness – is frequently judged to be more interesting than affirmation. In 1968 Gilles Deleuze wrote that difference ‘is manifestly in the air’, and the thinking of difference has broadly characterised continental philosophical development down to the present day, in the writings of thinkers such as Deleuze himself, Lyotard, Derrida, Bataille, Foucault, Lacan, Levinas and Ricoeur.¹ If decline in religious observance reflects a real disruption of traditional patterns of belief as much as it does a mood of social iconoclasm, then the ‘turn to difference’ is more than just a fashionable rejection of the metaphysical systems of the past. As Deleuze has pointed out, there is already a constructivist element at work in Kant’s First Critique which serves to ‘dissolve the cogito’ and ‘fragment the self’, thus liberating forces which in later thinkers will become powerfully deconstructionist.² Nietzsche is still widely read in our society, and the ‘postmodernity’ fathered by French readings of Nietzsche during the

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. xix.

² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

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nineteen sixties and seventies has successfully portrayed itself as representing what is most radical and engaging in contemporary thought.³ Negation then has captured something basic to the spirit of the times, reflecting reality as process, which is disjunctive, fissured and ultimately resistant to any schematisation. But thirdly, negative theology resonates positively with a deeply rooted trend in contemporary religiosity towards the privatisation and internalisation of religion, whereby faith is translated into transcendence or 'religious experience' which is indifferent or even hostile to traditional religious beliefs and practices. The term 'spirituality', which is widely and generally uncritically used in our society as a hallmark for the modern *homo religiosus*, captures this sense of an individual relation with the divine mediated through exciting experiences of a 'mystical' kind. Here in turn 'mystical' texts come into play which articulate a *via negativa* or disruptive discourse about God that can seem, in modern contexts, to challenge the conventions of religion: the tedium of church attendance and dull rehearsal of moribund and formulaic belief.

All three points of contact between negative theology and contemporary society, through religious scepticism, philosophical engagement with radical difference, and the turn to 'experience', serve to pull Christian apophysis away from its matrix in Christian cultic belief and practice. But the very texts that communicate negative theology in the modern world are themselves the product of times and places in which the discontinuity between 'mysticism', belief and practice did not obtain. This can be shown from the two principal streams of negativity in medieval Christianity. The first is that of a formation of the self in suffering and dereliction under the weight of the divine presence. This is most frequently, though not exclusively, apparent in texts written by religious women, who creatively explored a spiritual responsivity of abandonment and alienation. Such works, frequently of a visionary character, are embedded in strongly Christocentric devotional practices in which the physical and emotional suffering of Christ in powerlessness seemed to offer a particularly expressive model of sanctity for those for whom *imitatio* of Christ as king, priest and teacher was less easily accomplished. The intense spiritual reformation of the self described in these works is not a 'religious experience' at an angle to Christian belief however but is clearly deeply grounded in and structured by the primary Christian

³ See David B. Allison, ed., *The New Nietzsche* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1985; originally published by Dell Pub. Co., New York, 1977).

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doctrines of death and resurrection. It is the second stream of negativity, that of a more formal – and generally male – negative theology, which can be more easily misconstrued. This is a tradition which begins essentially with the *Mystical Theology* of pseudo-Denys, a fifth or sixth-century text, which originally belonged to a broader discussion on the possibilities and limits of speaking about God. It shows both a liturgical and biblical background, as marking the interpenetration of the human and the divine, and functions as an apophatic corrective to the exuberant excess of the *Divine Names*. There, as in other works, the same author draws out the extent to which language, primarily biblical in origin, authentically mediates and communicates the divine nature. The interdependence of the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names* shows the dialectical pulsation between affirmations and negations that characterises the enterprise of Christian negative theology as whole. Here negation is not free-standing, but secures the theological character of the affirmative speech patterns in address to God or speech about God. Being cancelled in this way, these are shown not to be ordinary language use at all but speech that is burdened to the point of excess: as exhausted as it is full. This same dialectic or ‘constructive deconstruction’ is to be found in an internalised form in Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind to God*, in which a transcendental epistemology of ascent is again inscribed throughout with the distinctive structure of Christian credal belief, as death and resurrection. In the case of Meister Eckhart the affirmative context can be seen both in the role played by the motif of ‘divine birth’ in his transcendental anthropology, and in the social context of his preaching. The fourteenth-century Rhineland saw an explosion of Eucharistic and visionary piety particularly among the women’s communities for which Eckhart, as a leading Dominican, held pastoral responsibility. His internalised, abstracted and cognitive understanding of the life of faith functioned as a counterpoint to the externalised concretions of visible piety. A fourteenth-century vernacular text such as the *Cloud of Unknowing* also retains Dionysian cycles of a dialectical affirmation and negation in the passage from the senses to contemplation. Once again a movement of negation, as ‘forgetting’, is held in tension with a movement of affirmation or spiritual ‘practices’, and each informs the other. Contemporary appropriations of negative theology, for all their vitality, tend to set Christian negation apart from its affirmations, thus changing it from a negation of experience within a Dionysian dialectic to an experience of negation as such which has cut free from the liturgical and ecclesial contexts that originally supported it. This is to risk trading a mechanism of correction which maintains the

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truly theological and transcendental character of Christian affirmations for an ineffable ‘experience’ which seems to validate the individual in his or her sublime independence of communal structures and commitments.

The contributors to this volume are united in their belief that negativity plays a central role within the Christian tradition, together with a sense that the specific problematic of the relation between negative theology and mainstream Christian tradition is one which has received insufficient attention in recent time. This broad unity of view survives the wide diversity of approach and subject matter which otherwise distinguishes the contributions, and the subtle conversations between contributors regarding the specific locus of the negative and its distinctive character which the careful reader will note. Addressing the scholarly deficit in reflection upon the negative within tradition necessarily calls into question some of the ways in which Christian apophatic texts are read today. But it also poses questions about the nature of the traditions which we have received from the past and which may of themselves invite more deconstructionist readings, with a new potential for liberating the reader from outmoded ways of thinking and believing. This can be an exploration of new ways of appropriating tradition itself, as it can become a resource for responsible, creative dialogue with other religions, in which silence and negation are frequently also key motifs which are foundational to the dynamic of their own distinctively religious ways of speaking. Not least, such a focus upon ‘negative theology’ can also become a means of conducting a dialogue with much in contemporary secular intellectual culture which is powerfully influenced by concepts of otherness, absence and difference.

The contributions are printed here following the chronological order of their subject matter, with the exception of the first and last chapter, which serve as a point of entry into and departure from the volume as a whole. In ‘Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason’, Denys Turner sets the scene for a discussion of apophasis and incarnation in Christian tradition by pointing to the deep opposition between theism and atheism which is a defining problematic of modernity. Uses of negation in contemporary ‘postmodern’ discourse stand in a precarious relation with both traditional forms of Christian negative theology and with modern denials of the existence of God. As a possible route out of the impasse of a sterile and oppositional thinking about God, in which both theisms and atheisms mutually define each other, Turner proposes readings of Thomas Aquinas on God, language and theology which show that he is ‘a theist who knows nothing of “deism”, an apophaticist whose

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negativity is rooted in rational foundations, and a rationalist whose conception of reason is as distanced from that of the Enlightenment as it is possible to be'. The crux of thomist rationalism and metaphysics is seen to reside in an ever deeper discovery of the foundation of the natural order as being *created*, thus revealing the Creator as one whose existence is known but whose nature always remains beyond the reach of human cognition. This presents a view of theological reason which contests any easy appropriation of a rationalist natural theology as it denies a fashionable postmodern rejection of reason and its operations. Grounded in a thoroughgoing and ultimately medieval theology of creation, this chapter points in the direction of an understanding of reason as intrinsically belonging in and ordered to a divinely created world.

In his study 'The quest for a place that is "not-a-place": the hiddenness of God and the presence of God', Paul Fiddes addresses the theme of Old Testament wisdom as the background to Christology and to a rethinking of the Trinitarian relations. Divine wisdom was hidden on account of its limitlessness, while human wisdom – as participation in God's wisdom – was both limited and flawed. Fiddes draws a parallel here between the non-place of biblical wisdom, as excess and ubiquity, with the revisiting of Platonic *khora* in postmodern texts, as a rhetoric of absence, the 'trace' and the Totally Other. Against both a postmodern transcendentalism of absence and a Christian dialectic of presence and absence, Fiddes proposes the hiddenness, or 'concealed presence' of God, in four sites or modalities. The first is the creation itself in which God is present, though not in a way that suppresses 'the otherness of created beings'. The second is the 'no-place' within the self which is the metaphorically structured place of encounter between God and the self. The third is the sphere of interpersonal relations, in which God is 'hidden' as a possibility of love, which Fiddes links with an argument for the hypostatisation of relations within the Trinity itself. The fourth modality of divine hiddenness is that of objects in the world which can come to mediate divine presence. But the incarnation itself represents the consummate form of the hiddenness of God, in that – like wisdom itself – the non-localised pleroma which indwells Christ invites us not to comprehension but to participation.

In 'The gift of the Name: Moses and the burning bush' Janet Soskice argues that the widespread rejection of the attributes of God as infinite, omniscient and all-powerful constitutes in fact a denial of the God of the Enlightenment, and that that God has been disseminated as much through the deconstructionist texts of modernity as by traditional

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readings. An analysis of the revelation of the divine name in Exodus, especially 3:14, which has often served as a proof-text for the God of the attributes, appears on closer analysis to be God's self-placing as the God of Israel's history. Moses is to know that what he meets is the God of Israel's past (of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), of its present (who sees its suffering) and of its future (the God who will lead them from slavery to the promised land). We discover in Augustine however a way of apprehending the divine attributes which is entirely dynamic, since Augustine knows God as presence within history, including the intimacy of his own particular history. The sense of the presence of God in life and history which we find in Augustine reverses the attempt to control God through a human naming, which is the object of the current critique of the attributes. In contrast Augustine, the rhetorician, understands that his ability to speak of God at all is grounded in God's prior calling, from within experience and history, and so is formed as prayer, which is the creative human response to the divine gift.

In 'Aquinas on the Trinity' Herbert McCabe sets out Thomas' understanding of the limits to our speaking about God, so that 'dealing with God is trying to talk of what we cannot talk of, trying to think what we cannot think'. We cannot know what God is but only what he is not, and we cannot know in what way he is, but only in what way he is not. The proofs for the existence of God do not represent an attempt to *understand* God therefore, but serve 'simply to prove the existence of a mystery'. Thomas seeks to show however that we can speak of God in a way that entails no contradictions, even if we cannot know the real meanings of the words that we use of him. Although we may not know in what way our words about God make sense, we can know that they are not nonsense. Our language about the Trinity is therefore highly provisional in that we are obliged to speak of God as both three Persons and one essence. Faith teaches us that there is no real contradiction here, although we cannot see how this is the case and must await a future resolution. Nor can we conceive of what it means for a relation not to be an accident but to be a subsistent relation within God, as Thomas proposes in his exposition of Trinitarian theology.

Bernard McGinn also finds influential elements of negativity as concealment in the theology of Martin Luther, as he draws out in his study '*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*: the hidden God in Luther and some mystics'. Here McGinn argues for two modalities of divine hiddenness in the thought of Luther, firstly in the incarnation itself and the *theologia crucis*, and secondly in the enigma of predestination. Using the work of Gerrish,

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McGinn points out that the suffering and dereliction felt by Luther concerning his own sense of guilt and fear as to his ultimate destiny causes him to flee to the revelation of God *sub contrariis* in the person of Christ. Without seeking specifically to draw out points of influence, McGinn argues for significant medieval parallels to the dereliction and fear expressed by Luther in his experience of the second hiddenness of God, in predestination. His proof texts come from the writings principally of women mystics such as Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, as well as John Tauler. Here he argues that there is an experience of negativity, as alienation and abandonment, which resonates with Luther's *Anfechtungen*. In the medieval mystical paradigm of negativity however, abandonment and the experience of divine absence is understood to be the veiled presence of the divine fullness, in contrast to Luther's movement from the hiddenness of predestination to the divine concealment in the incarnation.

Rowan Williams points to the tendency in Christian tradition to attribute negativity to the divine essence, which is then set above or beyond the visibility of the Trinitarian relations. In his reading in particular of the *Romanzas*, Williams argues that the Trinitarian theology of St John of the Cross breaks with this tradition by taking negativity into the Trinitarian relations themselves. This is achieved by extending the filial relation between Son and Father beyond the range of a closed mutuality and of gender so that it becomes an infinite, erotic desire. Trinitarian or 'deflected' love transcends the mutual affirmations of an I–Thou relation, which fixes the other as object of desire, and realises desire as excess and movement within infinity. It is this that St John identifies with the *ser* or essence of God. The self which is caught up into this relation desires not the Son but the Son's own desire for the Father, opened up through the Spirit. The empirical self, which rests upon a subject–object relation mediated by self-referential desire, is now dissolved by the resolution of that desire into movement towards an infinite term, which is personal participation in the life of the Trinity. This is the 'dark night of the soul' and the dereliction of Jesus, for whom the Father 'has ceased to be in any way a graspable *other* for the subjectivity of the Son', before it becomes the divine freedom.

In his paper, 'The formation of mind: Trinity and understanding in Newman', Mark McIntosh argues for the view that apophysis plays a key role in Newman's theology, particularly in his critique of knowledge. The apophatic moment is intrinsic to the preservation of mystery, which guarantees against the reductionism and positivism of sciences which

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are no longer in touch with religion on the one hand, and superficial rationalist forms of religion on the other. Through a reading of Gregory of Nyssa, McIntosh proposes that a robustly Trinitarian theology always delivers an uncompromising apophasis, and thus confronts the mind with a reality that transcends its own terms. This leads to the *formation* of the mind not as instruction in propositional doctrines but as a life which is conformed in its essential rhythms to the Trinitarian reality. For Newman, it is this principle which becomes the base of all human knowing, for secular reason too must constantly confront its own limits, and refuse reduction, if it is to begin to grasp reality in its wholeness. Small-mindedness remains fixed and fragmentary. Formation, therefore, predicated upon an apophatic excess, is the principle which unites both the knowledge that is faith, leading to the lived experience of truth from within, and the operations of discernment and judgement that are integral to advances in human understanding.

In 'In the daylight forever?: language and silence', Graham Ward opposes two contemporary thinkers on silence, George Steiner and Jacques Derrida. He argues that Steiner's silence as the cessation of speech looks back to a binary opposition which dates from the Baroque period and which manifests as the sublime on the one hand and as kitsch on the other. The sublime seeks to transcend language, which is no longer adequate to its expressive tasks, while kitsch empties the sign of its meanings, trading signification for visibility and the banal multiplication of surfaces. Both are of ecclesial provenance, the former originating, according to Michel de Certeau, in the rhetorical excess of mystical writings and the latter in the triumphalistic theatricality of the Church as spectacle. But both are also predicated upon a corrupted correspondence view of language, whereby language fails adequately to refer. Against this, Ward advocates allegory, as a non-violent way of maintaining otherness 'within the familiar'. This is specifically to renounce the dualisms of a referential, denotative view of language, since otherness is now creatively contained within language itself as an unfolding of multiple meanings which do not cancel each other out. Ward understands Derrida's philosophy of *différance*, and the 'angelology' of Michel Serres, to be precisely an argument for allegory, offering a constructive, transformational, even Eucharistic view of language which, freed from any possible criterion of in/adequacy, now offers the possibility of creative transference as seeing 'as'. Within such an economy of language, silence ceases to be opposed to speech, and becomes – as communication – a rhythm in speech itself.

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David Ford juxtaposes Anne Michaels' text 'Fugitive Pieces' with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'Christology' within the context of an attempt to answer the question: 'Apophysis and the Shoah: Where was Jesus Christ at Auschwitz?'. Ford compares the diverse images of silence that are scattered throughout Michaels' work of testimony, with the silence before the Word invoked by Bonhoeffer at the beginning of his 'Christology'. Ford sees the silence of the Church as grounded in the silence of Christ himself before Pilate, and defines the 'simultaneity of silence and word' as 'the simultaneity of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'. Ford sees a resonance between Michaels and Bonhoeffer to the extent that silence is constitutive of personhood, or the 'Who', in both, and believes that the imagery of affirmation and negation in Michaels is sufficiently analogous to Bonhoeffer's Christ to make a comparison of the two illuminating. Ford then poses difficult questions regarding Christian supersessionism, with its historical complicity in the Shoah, and argues that desire for the Kingdom of God is a common ground uniting Christians and Jews. Adopting Levinas' notion of 'face' and 'facing', Ford argues that Jesus Christ can be said to 'face' Auschwitz. Living before that face, Christians are therefore summoned to remember Auschwitz, to critique power in the interests of the weak, to pursue 'an ethic of gentleness and being for others', and 'forms of communication that have the crucifixion as their central criterion and dialogue as their central practice'.

In 'Soundings: towards a theological poetics of silence', Oliver Davies offers perspectives on the concept of silence which engage with some of the issues that surface in the volume as a whole. Here the focus is on silence in different textual environments, and – as a sign that is ultimately empty – its dependence on other signs for the inscription of its meanings. Davies points to two Russian words which express the distinction between the silence which speech interrupts and silence as suppressed speech: between 'natural' and personal silence. Old Testament texts relating to divine speech show an emphasis upon the latter rather than the former. The divine refusal of speech as *hārēš* is equivalent to the divine wrath and calls forth the parallel human response of *dāmam*, which expresses respectful awe at divine action. In contrast, the neoplatonic Greek tradition is interested in primal silence as divine and human transcendence (*sigē* and *hesychia*). Since apophysis in Christian speech about God is embedded in liturgical and devotional life, it therefore becomes expressive of a celebratory sense of presence and conforms to pragmatic as well as semiotic language use. Davies also briefly surveys the place of silence in modern Christian art (René Girard), deconstruction

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(Jacques Derrida) and post-Holocaust poetry (Paul Celan), and concludes that as an empty sign silence lends itself as a resource for dialogue between Christianity and secularism, and between Christianity and other religious traditions.

The contributions to this volume reflect an engagement with negativity in each period of Christian history, from the Old Testament background to post-Holocaust debates. The subject matter found here also ranges over many of the significant expressions of theological life, from biblical texts, to the work of major medieval and reformation theologians, from the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, to Christian art and literature. Although diversely analysed and explicated, as silence, hiddenness, dereliction, difference and otherness, negation plays a central role in all the theological reflections and textual readings presented here. This is not to suggest that the reader will discover a unified programme of apophatic theology in these pages, although certain themes do reoccur, such as the thinking of negation *within* the Trinity and not in a divine essence beyond it (Fiddes, McCabe, Williams, McIntosh), dereliction as negation (Davies, McGinn, Ford), negative theology and dialectic (Turner, Soskice, Ward). But each contribution argues in its own way for the importance of silence for mainstream Christian theology. It is this recognition of the potential fertility and creativity of the apophatic moment for Christian thinking that constitutes the thematic unity of the volume and grounds its contribution to contemporary debate.