

The Future of Knowledge and the Ways of Doing Theology

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ABSTRACT: The classical ways of doing theology, the apophatic and the cataphatic will face a new era in what regards human knowledge; the growth and the speed of the latter combined with the social changes that are already under way, will pose challenges and perhaps create opportunities for the Christian discourse about God. In this paper we argue that the knowledge of the future favors an apophatic approach rather than a cataphatic one.

KEY WORDS: knowledge, future, apophatic, cataphatic, postmodernity.

The way we do theology has been understood mainly in two different ways by theologians; generally, the Eastern tradition argues for a negative approach when speaking of God—because He transcends human existence and existence itself, we cannot know Him as an object that is presented to our minds, but we negate all that can be said about Him and unite with Him. The Western tradition has been generally associated with a positive approach—while we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know Him partially. But how would this be impacted by the development of human knowledge? In this paper we will explore the dynamics of future knowledge and the way we pursue the knowledge of God; we will look at the main ways of doing theology, then consider briefly the future of knowledge and then suggest which of the ways is more likely to be benefit of the changes.

The Possibility of Knowing God

James Walter Gustafson speaks of four approaches to knowledge: empiricism, rationalism, intuitionism and authoritarianism. So 'to know' applies to sense experience (empiricists believe that all knowledge arises from and is tested by appealing to sensory experience); to logical processes (knowledge comes by pure reasoning); to intuitions (some kinds of knowledge come by direct awareness, without empirical observation or logical deduction) and to authoritative pronouncements (this is also important in what regards the source of knowledge). (Gustafson 1998, 191–194)

In the long and productive history of Christian thought each of these ways of knowing has been considered appropriate to gain knowledge of the divine being.

The heart of all theology is to know God and to make Him known; but He is not accessible to us by any of the normal scientific criteria, so it seems that there is something about our knowledge of God which does not fit the regular scientific pattern. Although God and human beings are ontological different, the *imago Dei* in man opens up the possibility for the latter to know God, who reveals Himself. But man knowing the divine does not entail mastering or possession by man of the One known, but on contrary, knowing God leads to an even greater lack of knowledge.

Because we know God exclusively through what He reveals Himself to us, we must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit who speaks to us as church and as world about Christ. Therefore, the Scriptures are the main source of the theological knowledge, though they are not exclusive nor exhaustive.

Speaking on how we gain this knowledge of the divine, Vladimir Lossky differentiated between two kinds of human knowledge: the first one is episteme, which the scientific and philosophical epistemology; when we talk about God, *episteme* does not help at all, because our mind cannot see nor understand this reality. The Orthodox theologian goes on saying that any philosophical discourse about God is pure speculation. The other kind of human knowledge in Lossky's understanding is *gnosis*, which does not belong

naturally to human beings, but it is given to them when meeting the divine being. This way man discovers that God is knowable and unknowable at the same time. (Lossky 1998, 40, 41) The way in which God is 'knowable' is not a matter of logical processes but one of participation, experience of the divine, as we shall see.

The Apophatic Approach to the Knowledge of God

Rhetorical questions such as the one found in the book of the prophet Isaiah 40:25 "To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One" point to an approach less confident on man's part. When God reveals Himself as "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14), there is not much room for descriptive language about God. With a tradition that goes beyond Christian circles towards other religions as well as going back to pre-Christian philosophies, the concept of the impossibility to truly know the divine being has shaped the thinking of many Christian theologians. It was the influence of Philo of Alexandria, then the one of Athenagoras and surely the one of neo-platonism that lead to an emphasis of the utter transcendence of God—He is beyond existence, essence and even personality. In a sense, the analogies used to talk about God have the opposite result as they can limit the infinite God.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, an unknown monk in last 5th and early 6th century, was the first one to articulate a mystical theology which has become very influential especially for the Eastern tradition; a mystical approach flows only naturally from an understanding of God as it can be seen in the following paragraph from *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*:

We say this of the cause of all being beyond all: it is not being-less, not lifeless, not without reason, not without intellect. Not body . . . not what has quality, quantity, or mass, not I space, not visible . . . not light in what lacks, not, and has not, alteration, destruction, privation, diminution, or anything else which pertains to what is sensed. (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, 217–219)

The thought of Pseudo-Dionysius is interpreted and developed by Maximus the Confessor who anticipates the distinction between God's essence and His energies asserting that God can be contemplated, known in his energies or attributes, while remaining incomprehensible in His essence. This was reaffirmed by St Gregory Palamas in the 14th century, who also adds that the divine energies cannot exist apart His essence; they are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world. In relation to us humans, the divine energy is the grace of God. Man is transformed or 'deified' by uniting with God, experiencing Him in His energies. (Ware1993, 67–68)

Vladimir Lossky reaffirmed emphatically the distinction between *ousia* (the divine essence), *hypostaseis* (the three Persons) and *energeiai* (the energies, the graces of God to us). As the *ousia*, the uncreated, remains inaccessible to creatures, Lossky considers that the appropriate way to approach God is by denying all that is said about Him and unite with him, that is the apophatic way. We can know the One who is beyond all objects and knowledge through *agnosia* (unknowledge), by confessing the transcendence of the Trinity and contemplate Him. (Lossky1998, 40–41) What role then do the Scripture and the dogma play, since apophatic theology denies the ability of human mind to help man to know God? Lossky addresses this aspect by using the interpretation that Gregory of Nazianzen gave for Moses walking up on Mount of Sinai; he asserts that in theology there different levels of understanding for man, the Scriptures and the dogma being a first step in the contemplation of God. The goal of this process is deification, as the apophatic way understands that it will never end in rational knowledge but in the union with God. (Lossky 1998, 41)

The Cataphatic Approach to the Knowledge of God

At the other end is the positive approach in knowing God; this is based on the understanding that although transcendent and infinite, God can be known and talked about because He Himself revealed to humanity; He can be known through His presence and His works in creation. Our knowledge of God is conditioned by the extent of His

self-revelation, by the limitations of our creatureliness and fallenness, as well as by the grace of acknowledging Him as Lord in obedience and praise. Therefore we can know God and speak of Him as He is because He revealed Himself to us and because we meet Him in a personal relationship.

J.I. Packer emphasizes the difference between *knowing about God* and *knowing God*. The knowledge about God consists of believing the truths about God, His Person and His work, as found in the Scriptures and in the experience of the people of God. But we have to turn this knowledge about God into knowledge of God through saying yes to God so that we establish a personal relationship to Him, through meditation and communion with God. The meditation is seen as being an activity of the mind, when man thinks over and applies to himself, the things he knows about the way God works, His purposes and promises. He summarizes saying that we know God 'through Jesus Christ the Lord, in virtue of His cross and meditation, on the basis of His word of promise, by the power of the Holy Spirit, via personal exercise of faith.' (Packer 1985, 22)

Emil Brunner says that God is not an 'object' that someone can manipulate by means of his own reasoning. When man begins to know God, he realizes that God is incomparable and cannot be defined. But we can know God because He has made known His Name. Unless He does not make known His Name, He cannot be known. So this knowledge is not something we get on our own, but it is given. We can know who God is, who He is, only in His presence in revelation. (Brunner 1950, 117-127)

However, Lossky criticizes the cataphatic way of knowing God saying that this theology lead man to a kind of knowledge which is imperfect. In his understanding, the imperfection of the cataphatic theology is seen both the method and the result of it. He follows the arguments of Pseudo-Dionysius, who, trying to prove the superiority of the apophatic theology over the cataphatic one, in *The Theological Representations* argues that the positive theology begins with the unitary character of the divine nature going to plurality, emphasizing the Trinity and the incarnation. In *The Divine Names*, he asserts that the names given to God by us as 'good', 'life', 'wisdom' and others show clearly the descendent course in the sphere of plurality (the

same thing he mentions in *The Symbolic Theology*). Along these lines, Lossky sustains that the nature of God is unknowable in its depths, even God reveals Himself as being wisdom, love and goodness. The divine names found in Scriptures should not be used as rational concepts in making a positive science of the divine nature but they are images that lead us to the contemplation of the One who transcends everything.

Cataphatic theology does not suggest we can fully know God, but that God is knowable though not exhaustively. Paul implies this incomprehensibility of God when he writes ‘the Spirit reaches everything, even the depths of God’ and then that ‘no one comprehends the things of God except the Spirit of God.’ (1 Cor. 2: 10–12). So God is incomprehensible in the sense that He is cannot be fully known, not in the sense that we are unable to know Him.

The Apophatic–Cataphatic Synthesis

One of the greatest Orthodox theologians of the twentieth-century, Dumitru Staniloae considered that although the apophatic way as the supreme way of knowledge, it is not sufficient. A synthesis of the two ways is necessary—the cataphatic way presents God as the Creator and the Provider of the Universe, while the apophatic way gives us a direct experience of the mystical presence of God, which cannot really be communicated using words. In spite of this, apophatic knowledge has to be communicated through concepts of cataphatic knowledge. (Stanilaoe 1996, 81)

Nikos Matsoukas affirms that ‘the apophatic way and the cataphatic way of the knowledge of God is not a merely problem of gnoseology but an ontological problem.’ (Matsoukas 1997, 167) He asserts that using the ‘organical relationship’ between the cataphatic way and the apophatic way, we can avoid falling into the trap that the Western theology has fallen in, that is that theology studies the created, where God and His attributes would be sought for.

The Dynamics of the Future Knowledge

How would the dynamics of the knowledge of the future impact speaking about God? The future of knowledge is conditioned by what happens today; there are some aspects that point to the directions in which it is likely that knowledge will develop. Globalisation impacts all areas of life—it spreads the information in a network that does not have limits, so change and innovation become an integral part of our daily existence. David Weinberger seems to be right when suggesting that the properties of knowledge change dramatically now as they are conditioned by the medium by which it is communicated; if until recently knowledge has been mediated by paper, not the internet is the main ‘carrier’, which makes knowledge debatable, always open to criticism. (Weinberger 2014)

The volume of knowledge and its speed grow exponentially; for example, in what regards technology, the so-called Wright’s law—the decrease of cost is exponential because it is power law of cumulative production is combined with the so-called Moore’s law—technology grows exponentially in time, so that technological progress is indeed exponential and forecastable. (Nagy, Farmer, Bui, Trancik 2013)

This exponential growth in knowledge is triggering a specialization in every field as well as a centering of the sources of knowledge; despite the inter-connectivity of the global village, those that can contribute to the advancement of a highly specialized technology will be companies which will greatly benefit (e.g. Apple).

However, the future of knowledge is uncertain; in his book on future, Jacques Attali suggests three possible scenarios for the world to come: one possible development of human history will lead to a hyper-empire, built around commerce, wealth but which will have great social costs eventually causing the self-destruction of mankind. Another scenario sees the humankind entering a hyper-conflict, that will lead to wars that will involve nations, religions, terrorists; this too has the potential to end human race, or at least to take it a regress in all aspects of human life. The most optimistic scenario is about

the development of hyper–democracy, a system that will slowly take charge of all nations and that will improve life, share the benefits of scientific progress. Attali suggests that these scenarios will take place in the order they were presented, given that the mankind will not self-destruct in any of the first two. (Attali, 2007, 131–214) This is to say that future is open and it is highly probable but not guaranteed that knowledge will grow and be shared by all.

How Would This Impact Our Knowledge of God?

Knowledge was desacralized and demythologized by modernity, as David Harvey pointed out, but the changes are still under way in what we call ‘postmodernity’. (David Harvey, 1990, 13)

Reporting on ‘contemporary knowledge’, Jean–Francois Lyotard argues that postmodernity rejects the metanarratives of modernity as patronizing, actually brutally imposing on all; these metanarratives, fundamental in explaining reality and gaining knowledge in modern times, are to be ‘demolished’, something which seems to happen naturally in recent times. (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv) Because language is a social construction, it must be deconstructed so that ‘true knowledge’ to take place.

In the postmodern context, cataphatic theology is likely to loose more and more ground to an apophatic approach, as Karen Armstrong argues in her book, *The Case for God*. Because knowing a transcendent God is wholly dependent on His Self–revelation, progress of human knowledge does not entail a growth of knowledge of God—the latter is is an eschatological concept.

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