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David W. Fagerberg

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME, USA

ORCID: 0000-0001-9631-7755

APOPHASIS, ABNEGATION, AND LITURGY

The invitation to submit this article came with a description of *Warsaw Theological Studies*, and it is an impressive description. Topics, I am told, can range across dogmatic, fundamental, moral and pastoral theology; and there is additional interest in Biblical sciences, patristics, liturgy and catechetics; and, beyond that, there is still further concern for canon law, Catholic social teaching, church history, philosophy and ethics. This is a breadth and curiosity that defies the typical silos into which the academy sorts its studies! It invites unity instead of partition, integration instead of isolation, and lets the light of one study shine upon another. In this spirit, I am going to seize this opportunity to test an inkling I have about an underlying reciprocity between three theological concepts that are rarely synchronized, namely, apophasis, abnegation, and liturgy. Here is my hypothesis, stated succinctly, and the remainder of the essay is the attempt to work out my suspicion. Apophatic theology is a liturgical reaction to the sovereignty of God, which, in turn, causes a state of abnegation, which I therefore call liturgical abnegation. Abnegation means “denial”, and what needs denial, of course, is the self: self-will, self-love, self-sufficiency, self-esteem, self-rule. It is a matter of justice: who deserves worship? To whom shall we give latria? The true, Uncreated God, and not a created image (*eidolon*). But worse than idolatry would be worshipping ourselves: *auto-latria*. Denial of self, which is liturgical abnegation, consists of forsaking autolatry. Said another way, the infinity of God (apophasis) reveals our nothingness (abnegation), and our nothingness makes us rejoice (liturgy) in God’s infinity.

We shall have to begin by tinkering with our understanding of apophaticism. This is a well-known theological category, but frequently catalogued as an epistemological concern. It is taken to mean a sort of cancellation of knowledge. This is true, in a way, but insufficient. Epistemological apophaticism is often described as *negative theology* (*via negativa*) and means a sort of two-step dance of affirmation and retraction. Putting on and taking off. A cataphatic statement affirms something, after which the apophatic reaction denies it. God is Beauty ... but not beauty as we experience it; God is Power ... but not the sort of power we are thinking of; God is ... but, no, he isn't, he's beyond being. Negate the proposition as soon as you make it. Here, apophaticism feels like a wave that washes away every cataphatic sand castle we build.

But if God cannot be described, he can be loved. So perhaps it would behoove us to change the street address of apophaticism from philosophy to liturgy. Instead of the advance-and-retreat that comes from retracting every cataphatic proposal, *via negativa*, imagine the cataphatic and apophatic as two different roads.

The masters of the spiritual life teach us that we can arrive at some knowledge of the perfections of God by two different roads, both founded on the Scriptures. The first, by attributing to Him all the perfections of creatures, and referring them all to Him, as to their true source ; the second consists in taking them all from Him, as infinitely unworthy of Him and beneath Him; the first, they call knowing God by affirmation; the second, knowing Him by negation (Saint-Jure, 1870a, p. 89).

They are two *modes of contemplation*, both appropriate, both necessary. The divine darkness is a positive experience of God. So both modes – affirming and negating – are required of us.

These two modes are aptly explained under the two symbols of a painter and a sculptor. He who paints a picture delineates it on the canvas by the addition of various colours. A sculptor, on the contrary, by the gradual cutting off of chips of wood or marble, brings at last his statue to perfection (Bona, 1876, p. 77).

Apophatic theology is not like scraping away the paint the brush has just applied; it is a different way – the way of the sculptor. Why is it also required?

In studying to know God by negation, one resembles a sculptor who, wishing to make a statue of Our Lord, adds nothing to the marble, but on the contrary, retrenches it, taking away all that is superfluous and that hinders, as St. Denis says, our perceiving the figure that is hidden in the block so that he brings out beauty which we saw not, and takes away what obstructed the view (Saint-Jure, 1870a, p. 89).

Apophaticism knows by removing (abnegation) what would block our view. The advanced soul realizes that to know God best is to know He is incomprehensible, so calls the God it has just encountered “I know not what.” The soul *feels* God by going to the place where God shows himself: the burning bush, the low whisper after the earthquake, the cave and cross of Bethlehem and Calvary, and the still abiding tabernacle. But what we want in these surprising obscurities is to see God, to love God, not to figure out God.

Behold the negative contemplation. And as St. Denis says, the Divinity who is the source of all, and who by His essence is elevated above all, deigns to show Himself as far as is possible in this life to those who raise themselves above all that is, pure and impure, who leave behind them all that is great, sublime and glorious, and who, closing their eyes to created things, plunge themselves into that dark obscurity where He is truly found, whom the Scriptures place above all things created (Saint-Jure, 1870a, p. 99).

We have edged our way to an appreciation of apophaticism’s liturgical context and price of abnegation. Apophatic theology believes neither a natural created image nor a naturally conceived thought can contain the Uncreated One. When liturgical abnegation seeks to remove concept, the image, the imagination, it is because the soul wishes to go higher. “Grant me, O Lord, to behold Thee without any bodily image, without any species of the imagination, without any created light. Draw me after Thee, and outside of all created things” (Bona, 1876, p. 125). Mysticism is the coin of the realm for apophatic theology, and the *mystikos* is the hidden reality of Christ, and Christ’s mysteries remain present in the liturgy. God’s purpose in revelation is not to fill library shelves, it is to assume creatures into his glory. The dogma that God is unknowable must be accepted by a performance of the heart, and not merely by a deduction of the mind. Whereas liturgy is an operation of the heart, and whereas apophaticism should cause a response in the heart, and whereas the response is abnegation, therefore, I shall call it liturgical abnegation.

To trace this out more fully, I am going to rely on a group of Catholic spiritual authors whom I call theologians of liturgical abnegation.¹ I consult them because they deal honestly with the fact that Jesus himself made abnegation a condition for being his follower. Mark 8:34, Matthew 16:24, and Luke 9:23 are identical, but for Luke's addition of one word: "If any man would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross [daily] and follow me." (Greek *aparnesastho*, Vulgate *abneget*.) This is central to the gospel. "In this complete abnegation He admitted no compromise. There is no middle course. He said you must deny yourself, or I shall deny you; you can only belong to Me on that condition" (Grou, 1932b, p. 91). Abnegation is Jesus's teaching, not our invention.

It is not I who preach abnegation, it is our Lord Himself who has set down the conditions under which He will receive us as His followers ... No doctrine has ever found more forceful expressions in the Gospels ... If we are not generous enough to prepare ourselves to renounce everything, we should not follow Him. The words of our Savior allow of no quibbling (Liebermann, 1855, p. 133).

Theologians of liturgical abnegation concern themselves with asceticism, mortification, annihilation, abjection, abandonment, and renunciation; they explore methods of self-denial, self-renunciation, and self-detachment. Theirs is a sort of pastoral theology that charts the course of a human heart under the demands of the gospel, and I am proposing here that it is a key to a different way of appreciating apophaticism.

God is supreme. God is All. The Uncreated cannot be comprehended by the finite. (*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*, said Augustine.) What response does this growing realization draw from the soul? As God becomes more mysterious, the soul becomes more trusting; as God's supremacy increases in our understanding, humility increases in our heart; as God grows grander, the soul becomes littler.

Be comforted, ye poor and simple men and women, in your littleness, so only that it be accompanied with humility, for this it is on which God sets a value: and of this the devils will never be able to perform the slightest act (Boudon, 1869b, p. 17).

1 These authors wrote between 1500 and 1900 (from John Avila to Francis Liebermann). I have selected them as a third group after the Fathers of the patristic era, and the scholastics and mystics of the medieval era. On the one hand, they are well known, but on the other hand, they are ignored.

It is a kind of ignorance, but not confined to the rational variety, because at the end something is known, after all. It is known experimentally: it is tasted.

Contemplatives call this ignorance a cloud. Raised up and carried on the ray of divine ignorance the soul surmounts this, not in order to understand, but so that it may know that God is sweet. In this way it knows by taste what it does not comprehend by intelligence. The less it understands God, the more ignorant it is of him, the sweeter the soul finds him (Rodriguez, 1964, p. 40).²

Apophaticism will create the liturgical posture as the creature discovers his own dependence before the source of all Being. “Good Jesus, how truly happy and holy should I be if I could clearly behold my own *Nothing* in Thy *All*; if I could embrace crosses as crowns” (Castaniza, 1874, p. 350).

Abnegation and apophasis go hand in hand, united in latria. Man the creature, the created, discovers his nothingness when confronted by God, the Uncreated. And

he who has fully grasped the principle that God is All, and the creature nought, has mastered the whole spiritual life. Its object is to give to each that which is due; *i.e.*, to God everything without reserve; to the creature simply nothing – and therein lies perfect humility and perfect submission to Grace (Grou, 1871a, p.78).

Giving someone what he is due is called justice; God is due worship; the just soul is one that is spiritualized by abnegating idolatry, and coming to esteem God with a constant will.

To live continually by faith, and to esteem and love nothing but what we ought to esteem and love conduces much to spiritualize a soul. Man rarely will relinquish his reason: nevertheless he must raise himself above it or drag on a life of imperfections. Faith is a participation of the eternal wisdom ... The soul in this disposition, knows nothing of God but that he is incomprehensible. She loses herself in this darkness (De Bernieres-Louvigny, 1843, p. 238).

² This is the Spanish lay porter at Majorca, known as Alonso; not the Alphonsus Rodriguez who wrote the three volumes on Christian perfection.

“To lose oneself” is abnegation; “in this darkness” is apophysis; “to esteem and love what we ought to esteem and love” is liturgy. The mind encounters a great and incomprehensible mystery, but the soul is wonderfully content in her inability to understand it. This requires a unity of faith, hope, and love, the great triumvirate of theological virtues bestowed by spiritual rebirth at baptism. Abnegation is a reaction to liturgy present (which is faith: having tasted God, the world becomes vain), or a reaction to liturgy absent (which is hope: the soul is an empty vessel waiting to be filled), or a reaction to liturgy incipient (which is love: the eschatological liturgy is beginning, and we sell all in order to buy the field where that pearl of great price is buried). The mind has no fear while being led captive by *faith* because *hope* is wrapped secure in an embrace of *love*. Annihilation is a state of repose. An empty vessel can contain more than one that is full of self.

Behold what suddenly came into my mind about this great and incomprehensible mystery. I am wonderfully content that I am in a state of inability to understand it; and that the powers of my soul are led captive by faith, surrounded with clouds ... There is no better way upon earth to please God than by submitting our understanding and will to his revelations. How is this submission of our spirit, which is naturally curious and inquisitive, pleasing to God! How much hereby do we honor and glorify him! ... I perceive the infinite distance between the Creator and his creature; and, being plunged into the abyss of my own nothingness, I acknowledge, O my God, and adore, thy grandeurs and perfections – I admire, I love, I obey (De Bernieres-Louvigny, pp. 120-21).

The full grandeur of apophatic theology requires humility, submission, admiration, obedience – in short, a liturgical life. It is performed before the altar, not in the library.

It is interesting to remember that behind both the Latin *abnegationem* and the Greek *apophatikos* stands the act of denial. Denial of self is required in order to be content to deny the idea that our finite knowledge can grasp God. The soul will be in mysterious repose when it “mortifies all its passions and represses all the movements of nature in order not to disturb the operations of the Holy Spirit;” when it “repels all distractions that are presented to the mind, and shuts out the image of all objects likely to divert it from its intimate union with God;” when it “inflicts a species of martyrdom on nature, silencing all its thoughts, stifling all its desires, and suspending all its operations, that it may be possessed, moved, and animated only by God;” when it dies to self and “loses itself, buries and annihilates itself, in

God;" in short, when it "offers God the sacrifice of all its powers, its thoughts, its desires, its actions, being like a victim that is slain, burned, and consumed on the altar of His love" (Crasset, 1892, pp. 223-24). From the theological side, apophasis says God is unknowable, but lovable; from the anthropological side, a liturgical sacrifice of thought is made upon being consumed on the altar of love.

Ignorance is not a good in itself unless it is accompanied by submission; unless it creates submission. Ignorance creates a desire for a different kind of knowing in the soul. Elizabeth of the Trinity records her soul's reaction on the first day of her last retreat.

"Nescivi." "I no longer knew anything." This is what the "bride of the Canticles" sings after having been brought into the "inner cellar." It seems to me that this must also be the refrain of a praise of glory on this first day of retreat in which the Master makes her penetrate the depths of the bottomless abyss so that He may teach her to fulfill the work which will be hers for eternity and which she must already perform in time, which is eternity begun and still in progress. "Nescivi." I no longer know anything, I do not want to know anything except "to know Him, to share in His sufferings, to become like Him in His death" (Elizabeth of the Trinity, 2014, p. 141).

The God whom we cannot comprehend is the God whom we desire, but we must desire him on the cross, which is where he waits, expectantly, for us to join him. The telos of liturgical abnegation is to know nothing (apophasis); to desire nothing except God (abnegation); and to be satisfied with that state (liturgical identification with the suffering Christ).

It is apophatic when we have no thought of God because he is incomprehensible. It is abnegatory when we take no thought of ourselves because we are entirely centered upon God. Not only must the soul dismiss the comprehensible from the mind, the soul must also dismiss created things from her desire. Then she is left with God, alone and All, and is happy.

O how sweet is this voice. It makes all my Entrails to leap for joy. Speak, O my Spouse, and let none other venture to speak but thou alone. Be silent, O my Soul, speak thou, O Love. I say that then, *we know all, without knowing any thing*. 'Tis not that we have the Presumption to think, that we possess all Truth in our selves. No, no: quite the contrary; we are sensible that we see nothing, that we can do nothing, that we are nothing. We feel this, and we are ravished at it (Fenelon, 1720, pp. 74-75. Capitalization in the original).

Liturgical abnegation is nothingness before the All, the little before the Great, the sinner before the Holy One, the annihilated before the giver of Life, the finite worshiper before the apophatic God. Liturgical abnegation describes our posture before our Creator. We will never apprehend our nothingness so well as when considered against apophatic theology. The nothingness of a contingent creation is a corollary of the Absolute's necessity.

God is a being that has nothing of nonbeing, who can lose nothing, gain nothing, who enfolds in Himself all being, who is the source of all being, who cannot depend on any other in any sense at all, neither for His being more for His better being; if I have been penetrated with profound reverence for this incomprehensible greatness, I do not think that I have ever understood so well the nothingness of all things as when considered against this idea (De la Colombiere, 1960, p. 72).

The soul embracing nothingness is different from the mind knowing nothing. Negative theology is a negation of propositions, but apophasis is a divine science of God wherein a knowledge is gained when the mind withdraws itself from created images, and abandons itself to nothingness, and all that is left is liturgy.

There is a certain divine science of God, and a knowledge which is gained by ignorance, by a conjunction which surpasseth all understanding, when the mind itself being first withdrawn from all other things, and then also forsaking herself, is conjoined with the most glorious rays, and from thence is illumined with the unsearchable abyss of wisdom.

Moreover, from this experience the soul realizes the depth of her nothingness; for seeing how the Spirit of God is to live in her and how she is to be wholly subjected thereto, she most willingly prostrates herself and forms a thousand acts of reverence and adoration (Barbanson, 1928, pp. 164-65).

Conforming to God by participation is more important than understanding God. The result is a bright darkness, joyfully received.

The soul, therefore, having entered the vast solitude of the Godhead, happily loses itself; and enlightened by the brightness of most lucid darkness, becomes through knowledge as if without knowledge, and dwells in a sort of wise ignorance (Blosius, 1903b, p. 147).

Apophatic theology must be *exercised*, and not merely agreed upon in theory. This is not easy. Imperfect souls intend to think of God apophatically, but have difficulty.

If they were to give an account of what they conceive in their minds when they intend to think of God, all that they could say would be, God is nothing of all that I can say or think ... [but] gross images are not yet chased out of their minds (Baker, 1911a, p. 536).

For a worship to be pure, the soul must have a firm grasp upon the difference between the created and the Uncreated, and learn

now by experience that God far transcends all bodily, spiritual and divine images, as well as all the mind can understand about Him, whatever can be said or written about Him and whatever name can be given Him. The soul clearly perceives that all these things are infinitely distant from the real truth of the divine essence, and that the essence of God is above all names. The soul does not see the essence of God, whom it feels (Blosius, 1800a, p. 93).

This is the liturgical antinomy of transcendence and immanence, of essence and energies, of mystery and revelation. The soul does not understand, but she hears God speak

in the inward silence and in the secret depths of the soul. This hidden word it receives, and experiences the happy embrace of mystical union. For when, through love, the soul goes beyond all work of the intellect and all images in the mind, and is rapt above itself (a favour God only can bestow), utterly leaving itself, it flows into God: then is God its peace and fulness (ibidem, p. 94).

Such shalom trains a liturgical ear and tongue, and prepares it for ecstasy now, here, already, by deification.

I know God sometimes suffers these imperfections to live in us for the exercise of virtue, and the trial of our fidelity. However his will is that we strive to be dead to the world and ourselves, having our affections so fixed on heavenly things, as to live a divine life in mortal bodies (Blosius, 1800a, p. 94).

The cross is required for resurrection, by which I do not mean just some future reward; rather, I mean the cross is required for our eternal life to begin now.

Apophatic theology proclaims that God is mystery: therefore man and woman should fall down in adoration, obeisance, oblation, sacrifice, repentance, discipleship. Love is a requirement for being brought into the mystery. The mind is stilled, truly, only when all has been *liquefied by love*.

It is a great thing, an exceeding great thing, in the time of this exile, to be joined to God in the divine light by a mystical and denuded union. This takes place when a pure, humble, and resigned soul, burning with ardent charity, is carried above itself by the grace of God, and through the brilliancy of the divine light shining on the mind, it loses all consideration and distinction of things and lays aside all, even the most excellent images; and all liquefied by love, and, as it were, reduced to nothing, it melts away into God. It is then united to God without any medium, and becomes one spirit with Him, and is transformed and changed into Him, as iron placed in the fire is changed into fire, without ceasing to be iron ... Here it tastes such delight, that heaven and earth and all that is in them seem by the greatness of the consolation to melt away, and to be reduced to nothing (Blosius, 1903b, pp. 94-95).

Liturgy invites apophaticism to its ecclesial homeland, where apophatic theology is not a matter of logic, but a matter of turning away from idolatry, toward the God who is beyond us. Doing so follows the path Jesus laid out.

The infinite love he has for his Father made him go out of himself, and put himself into an inferior state by his incarnation, that he might render these thanks, praises and services which he merited. It made him descend to those wonderful humiliations, and profound annihilations, whereby he might do homage to the infinite grandeurs of his Father. Teaching us, by his example, that as the Son of God had no other means to honor his Father than by humiliations and sufferings, so we should take up our cross and follow him, that God may be glorified (De Bernieres-Louvigny, p. 136).

Glorifying God is the final cause of apophysis and abnegation: it is a liturgical cause. Christ lived a sort of “kenotic ecstasy:” he denied himself the equality with God that was his by right, and emptied himself to become a servant, and be obedient to the point of death on a cross. His kenosis inspires our abnegation. We

do not have a glory like his to deny, but our will needs to be denied, which we do by following his example and having no desire except for the Father. To say “annihilate me” is to say “God, establish Thyself in me.” There would be no need for us to empty our hearts unless something new is going to be put in; no reason to annihilate what is there, unless new life is about to arrive. What ought we not be willing to empty out, so Christ can take its place?

We have set our eyes on life, and life is infinitely fuller than rational definitions, and no formula can encompass all the fullness of life. Especially can no formula encompass the fullness of eternal life. Yet this is the ocean in which the soul should live. Life in God is the element made for the soul, and

when out of this element, the soul is like a whale that has been stranded in a brook: the great creature has not space enough to swim or plunge in its waters. Hence it ever desires the ocean, which, for its depth and wideness, is capable of containing it and millions of others. Here these huge creatures find no bottom, but can swim in all fullness, and enjoy security from danger; for here they are in their element and, as it were, in their own kingdom (Baker, 1911b, p. 165).

Poor souls! A whale in a brook! No wonder they rest not in creatures, nor in created images; no wonder they thirst after the spaciousness and infinity of God. Liturgy draws us out into apophatic depths.

Abnegation means “I no longer live.” Precisely. “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” This is the fountainhead of liturgical abnegation. The Christian is not a Manichean, and does not scorn creation or disdain matter. The reason why asceticism targets the passions, and abnegation abandons the creature, is because something brighter fills the eye. “When God, by himself and without the process of reasoning, gives the soul this divine light, there is a greater difference between it and the light of reasoning than there is between the entire light of the sun and the light of one candle” (Rodriguez, p. 116). Worldliness seeks to confine the eye to this world alone; asceticism seeks to remember the Creator at all times.

The world has many trades and many tasks for its many sons; but there is one daily labour which it seems to add to all of them, the effort to put away from its children the remembrance that they are creatures, in order that they may the more undoubtedly forget that they have a Creator (Faber, 1858, p. 89).

All worldliness comes from this forgetfulness. On the other hand, “who would be worldly if he always remembered the world was God’s world, not his?” (ibidem, p. 106). We see more clearly why liturgical abnegation requires keeping the heart void of self and of creatures. It was the lesson Dionysius was trying to teach when he performed the sculptor’s art of taking away created perfections so they would not block our view of God Almighty’s excellence.

By seeing this, we may learn, if we have a mind to know what God is, the necessity of shutting our eyes to the beauties we observe in creatures, for fear of deceiving ourselves, whilst we judge of God by those things that bear no proportion at all with his greatness. We are to look upon them as mean and base, and raise up our souls to the contemplation of a Being that exceeds all beings; of a Substance, above all other substances; of a Light, that eclipses all other lights; and of a Beauty, which is so far beyond all beauties imaginable, that the greatest of them, and the most complete, is but ugliness and deformity when set by this (De Granada, 1845, p. 11).

Our liturgical eye is too full of God to find full satisfaction in the world. We can have happiness in the world because it contains a glint of God, but the pathway cannot satisfy as our homeland. Created things fall short because

there is nothing which can serve as a ladder whereby [the intellect] may ascend unto God, who is so high,” and “if the intellect will use them as proximate means of union, [they] will prove not only a hindrance, but the source of many errors and delusions, in the ascent of this mountain (John of the Cross, 1864, pp. 84-85).

We may use the world, but we must not be ruled by the world. This is the first lesson that Ignatius of Loyola would have us learn in his exercises, announced in three parts. First, “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.” Second, “the other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.” And third, “hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him” (Ignatius, 1951, p. 12). Worldliness can be defined as taking the world without reference to God, and prayer can be defined as seeking God always, everywhere, constantly. So – pray without ceasing!

It is one of the mysteries of iniquity that original justice has been so perverted that the good cosmos can become an occasion of stumbling – that the world can become worldly. This is what

Christians call worldliness. It is this which stands in the way of God's honour, this which defrauds Him of the tribute due to Him from His creatures, this which even blinds their eyes to His undeniable rights and prerogatives (Faber, pp. 369-70),

and therefore the theology of abnegation must investigate “how God's own world comes to stand between Himself and the rational soul, how friendship with it is enmity with Him” (ibidem). What else might we be tempted to hallow (revere, fear, glory in) besides God? There seem to be countless options, but they all seem to circle back to an egocentric desire to ourselves be esteemed, honored, satisfied, and praised by the world. That is why we go chasing after the world; that is why the world goes chasing after us. The Dionysian advice to shut our eyes to creatures is based upon the severe fact that the world will tempt us to autolatry. But if sanctifying grace can cure that sickness unto death, then even the world will lead us to an abnegation that awakens apophasis.

If he descends to the world, as far as his soul and body are concerned, he is plunged into the abyss of all that he owes to God, and he says to them, “Lord, where is the love with which I love you? How is it that I do not die for your love?” ... There is scarcely room for reasoning here, rather in an intellectual vision the light shows the soul all the benefits God is given the soul and body, and they surpass understanding (Rodriguez, p. 144).

Abnegation that is liturgical is not based on stoical resistance, or personal attempts to virtue signal heaven, or cosmic disdain in favor of ethereal escape. Liturgical abnegation is based on love, because

it is the property of this love to take away the perception of all that is not God ... [He who possesses this love] thinks no more of pleasure, or reputation, or honour, or riches. He forgets natural goods, temporal goods, moral goods, spiritual goods, being filled only with the Sovereign Good. I will say more: he even loses the memory of himself ... In vain shall you speak to him of anything else, his heart is ever turned towards God alone. His heart and his flesh are, as it were, in a holy trance as regards all created

things: God only, the God of his heart and his eternal portion, is his one only all. This is the state in which that Apostolic man was who declared (Gal. 2: 20) that he no longer lived, but that Jesus alone lived in him (Boudon, 1869a, pp. 103-04).

Be liquefied in love, and the soul can flow out of herself, ecstatically. We saw it in Christ's Incarnation; we see it in Christ's continued kenosis in the Blessed Sacrament; we see it in the saint-in-training who seeks to imitate it in a love-life that synergizes with the Holy Spirit, who is, after all, the fount of love.

The loving soul, as I have said, flows out of itself, and completely swoons away; and as if brought to nothing, it sinks down into the abyss of divine Love, where, dead to itself, it lives in God, knowing nothing, feeling nothing, save only the love that it tastes. It loses itself in the infinite solitude and darkness of the Godhead; but so to lose itself is rather to find itself (Blosius, 1800a, p. 94).

Deification (theosis) is operating behind the scenes everywhere. It is the end of the liturgical path, and it is the reason for liturgical abnegation. Christ put off his glory and put on what is human; we do the reverse.

Then, putting off whatever is human and putting on what is divine, [the soul] is, as it were, transformed and changed into God, as iron placed in fire receives the form of fire, and is changed into fire. Just as the iron thus glowing with fire does not cease to be iron, so the soul, as it were, deified, does not change its nature and still remains itself.

The soul, therefore, remains itself; but whereas it before was cold, now it burns; whereas it before was dark, now it shines with light; whereas it before was hard, now it has become soft.

The essence of God has so flowed into its essence, that we may say the soul has, as it were, the same tint or colour.

Enkindled with the fire of divine Love, and entirely liquefied, the soul passes into God, is united to him without any medium, and becomes with Him one spirit, even as gold and brass are welded into one mass of metal (ibidem, p. 95).

Who could comprehend the life of the Trinity? This is the ultimate apophatic mystery! There could be nothing less fathomable than the Holy Trinity, yet we

are invited to know it by participation. The soul loses herself, flows out of herself, burns and glows. She becomes a *sequela Christi*. Jesus will make us adopted sons, as he is the Only-Begotten Son.

We know, says the beloved disciple, that when Jesus shall appear in His glory we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. How is this? In seeing a beautiful thing one does not become beautiful; a beggar does not become rich by looking at a king; a fool may gaze for days together on a wise man and yet not lose a particle of his folly. But it is not possible to see God as the blessed see Him without becoming like Him, because the seeing of Him is also the acquisition and possession of Him, and intimate and perfect union with Him (Saint-Jure, 1870b, pp. 229).

Without liturgy, we could never enter on the path of abnegation. We are not brought to the apophatic God by tinkering with our natural understanding, we are brought to it by an overpowering light. For abnegation such as this, we need the greater fire of a nobler liturgy.

The words of the soul then are “with anxious love inflamed.” The soul has passed out and gone forth in the obscure night of sense to the union of the Beloved. For, in order to overcome our desires, and to deny ourselves in all things, our love and inclination for which are wont so to inflame the will that it delights therein, we require another and greater fire of another and nobler love – that of the Bridegroom – so that having all our joy in Him, and deriving from Him all our strength, we may gain such resolution and courage as shall enable us easily to abandon and deny all besides (Saint John of the Cross, 52).

The secret of the martyr, the religious, and the convert are contained here. The violent desire for God “excites us to quit our country, to cross deserts, to traverse the seas, to leave parents and friends” (Saint-Jure, 1870b, p 229), and this desire will be fully and gloriously satiated.

Happy indeed is that soul which is filled constantly with an earnest desire for purity of heart and holy introversion, or recollection of spirit, and entirely renounces all self-love, self-will and self-seeking. For such a soul merits to approach nearer and nearer to God ... It is now capable of receiving from God a grace of unspeakable excellence, it is brought to that living

fountain which floweth forth from eternity and with exceeding abundance refresheth the minds of the saints.

Now the powers of the soul shine like stars, and the soul itself is fit to contemplate the abyss of the Godhead with a calm, simple and joyful intuition, without any imagination and without any reflections in the intellect (Blosius, 1903b, pp. 92-93).

We readily understand that we must relinquish any sensible grasp of God – he is spirit, after all. We must just as truly relinquish any intellectual grasp of God – he is God, after all. Now the surprise is that liturgy gives us both, even as it removes both. This is cultic antinomy. Liturgy gives us a sensible grasp of the ungraspable God when he hides himself under the veil of its sacraments. And liturgy also gives us an intellectual grasp of the unknowable God when he hides himself under its theology. Hence the need for *liturgical theology*, something different from philosophical or speculative theology. Liturgical theology is deeper, wider, more apophatic, more dependent upon abnegation, than comprehensive theology (theology that seeks to comprehend). It is true that liturgy gives us images, but we are to transcend them. There, Jesus does not ask “study me;” he commands “eat me.”

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APOPHASIS, ABNEGATION, AND LITURGY

SUMMARY

Apophatic theology is normally housed in the epistemological wing of the academy, and is treated as a *via negativa* that negates the assertion just made. This apophaticism feels like a wave that washes away every cataphatic sand castle we build.

In this essay, I would like to change the street address of apophaticism to the house of liturgy. There, apophatic theology is a liturgical reaction to the sovereignty of God. It is a posture of latria. However, such a liturgical posture depends, in turn, upon abnegation. The infinity of God (apophasis) reveals our nothingness (abnegation), and our nothingness makes us rejoice (liturgy) in God's infinity. Worse than idolatry is worship of ourselves: *auto-latria*.

Apophatic theology is a liturgical reaction to the sovereignty of God, which, in turn, causes a state of abnegation, which I therefore call liturgical abnegation because it means forsaking autolatry.

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David W. Fagerberg