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# **The Paramount Importance of What Cannot Be Said in Public Theological Discourse**

William Franke

## **Apophatic Thought as the Missing Mean Between Radically Secular and Radically Orthodox Theology**

One of the important gains for the perspective of negative or apophatic theology is its potential for enabling unprejudiced dialogue among religious faiths and, perhaps even more importantly, between religious faith and secular culture. In order to demonstrate this potential, it will be instructive to pay close attention to what are apparently deeply opposed approaches to contemporary thinking in theology and the philosophy of religion. Postmodern approaches to religion are, of course, myriad, and I am going to mention only a small selection of them. However, the issues raised are representative and are played out along similar lines across the whole range of philosophies and cultures, particularly in a postmodern world fractured by various, sometimes warring religions and their perennial sworn opponents. I argue that a contemporary philosophy of the unsayable, extending the traditional insights of negative theology, can serve to break down and diffuse these antagonisms, which mirror potentially violent and destructive conflicts in society today.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, we find secularized approaches to theology stemming from the Death of God movement of the 1960s, particularly as pursued by North American religious thinkers such as Thomas J.J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist, John Caputo and others, including most recently Clayton Crockett, who stress that the possibilities for theological discourse are fundamentally altered by the new conditions of our contemporary world. Our world today, in their view, is constituted wholly on a plane of immanence, without need of reference to “God” as a transcendent reality, to such an extent that traditional appeals

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<sup>1</sup> The violent potential of religion in a postmodern perspective has been highlighted notably by *H. De Vries*, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, Baltimore, 2002; and *C. Crockett* (Ed.), *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology*, Charlottesville, 2006.

to faith in an omnipotent, wholly other divinity or in an other world and afterlife become difficult to take as more than self-deception and willful blindness to our actual human reality. This American trend has certain affinities in its secularizing emphases with European philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben, who also think essentially out of the death of God that was announced by Nietzsche. This announcement had been anticipated by Hegel and was followed up in influential ways by Heidegger, with his program of a deconstruction of metaphysics or, more precisely, his taking up the task of a “destruction of the history of ontology” (“die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der *Geschichte der Ontologie*”) announced in paragraph 6 of *Sein und Zeit*.

On the other hand, we hear the assertion of a new lease on life for theology based on its traditional affirmation of divine transcendence over against the putative arrogance of all claims of human autonomy. This claim is advanced provocatively by theologians leagued under the banner of the so-called Radical Orthodoxy. Emanating from England, originally from the University of Cambridge in the 1980s and 90s, this movement includes in its core such theological thinkers as John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, Rowan Williams, and Philip Blond. These theologians have linked their approach with that of the predominantly French *nouvelle théologie*, beginning with Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Hans Urs von Balthasar in the mid-twentieth century and continuing with Catholic theologians like Jean-Yves Lacoste, Louis-Marie Chauvet, and Olivier-Thomas Venard today. Both the Anglo-Saxon and the continental versions of this outlook stress that theology as embedded in traditional Christian belief is not only crucial for interpreting the past: it continues to offer a privileged and uniquely penetrating discourse on the true nature of reality even in the postmodern world. These theologians hold that it is necessary to start from theological revelation as expressed in the Christian vision and its narrative in order to understand the world – and not the other way around, as is the common conviction of secular theologians. Starting from the world in its actuality – *this* world as it reveals itself in human life and society and without externally imposed metaphysical and a fortiori theological constructions – is the bottom line for secular theology. Radical Orthodoxy counters this by rejoicing that we are always already within some narrative in encountering the world and that the Christian narrative is preferable to alternative narratives in its account of this world no less than of the next or of whatever others.

Programmatic publications from these two camps have included shrill accusations against one another. Curiously, both tend to reject negative theology, although I intend to show that an underlying apophatic turn of thought is precisely what they share in common. My contention is that both of these postmodern philosophical theologies have, especially until quite recently, been living somewhat

in denial of their intimate proximity to the apophatic tradition to which they are in fact deeply and inextricably indebted, albeit in very different ways. They have been suspicious and even fearful of it for reasons that I wish to elucidate and dispel. It is not that they are unaware of negative theology and of its nearness to their own positions, but they are not exploiting it as much as they could and perhaps should, neither acknowledging that their own essential insights are ones that have been engendered and fostered to maturity in the matrices of this tradition over millennia. By exposing certain misprisions of negative theology practiced by each of these camps, I endeavor to reveal apophatic thought as the missing mean between them. I claim that the common root, indeed the radicality, of both radical secular theology and Radical Orthodoxy is a not fully acknowledged apophaticism.

I further contend that the implicit apophatic underpinnings of both approaches are also what make each of them vital avenues of theological reflection in postmodern times. In taking this position, I align myself with what might be discerned as another strain of postmodern religious thinkers – one including scholars such as Hent de Vries, Gregor Hoff, Kevin Hart, Thomas Carlson, and Elliot Wolfson – who think deliberately and explicitly out of the various historical reservoirs of negative theology. There are other cases like Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Richard Kearney, who can be variously aligned with aspects of either the secularizing or the theologizing approaches to religion, but all are inspired, I maintain, most essentially by an apophatic vision.

My aim, then, is to situate apophatic thought as it develops in philosophy and theology in a key position in the midst of some of the most challenging developments in the philosophy of religion today. Such a positioning is meant to mediate and unblock the deadlock between secularizing approaches on the one hand and theologizing approaches on the other. Apophasis (the classical Greek word for “negation” and the generating source of negative theology) is the missing link that would enable both of these strands of thought to be woven together around what offers itself as their common – even if mostly covert – heritage. They share in common a radical insight into the structural negativity of human experience – and especially of all its expressions in language – as turned toward and dependent on an Other, on something that or someone who the human mind cannot comprehend or say. Apophasis, furthermore, lies at the root of their common concern to elucidate how religion is vitally relevant to our self-understanding in a postmodern age. Religion is always deeply concerned with what cannot be adequately said, and any discourse that attempts to speak for or out of it and its concerns cannot but falter, unless it acknowledges and embraces a dimension of unsayability at its core. Even such faltering itself, moreover, demands to be read as an inadvertent manifestation of the apophatic!

Of these two opposing currents within contemporary philosophy of religion,

the one has often articulated a wish to terminate talk of theological “transcendence”, while the other rails against the modern “immanentist” reduction of religion. An informed acknowledgment of the mutual implication of transcendence and immanence, as well as of affirmation and negation, an interweaving which is thought most originally and intensely in the theological tradition of apophysis, is the perspective that can best accommodate and valorize the strengths of each of these approaches, without excluding those of the other. Both currents finally agree in the recognition of insuperable limits to any human knowledge of the truly or ultimately real and appeal, consequently, to theological symbols and concepts and structures or patterns of thought. This is the common focus from which they open up their respective insights. Such insight is always subtly powered by what it cannot quite say and is illuminated from beyond what it can grasp or comprehend: and specifically the apophatic tradition has insisted on just this predicament of human knowledge as beholden to *unknowing*, especially concerning things ultimate and divine.

My purpose is not to appropriate and assimilate these two different directions or currents of thought about religion, but to facilitate flow and cross-pollination of ideas between them, in the interests of making apophysis emerge more clearly as the perennially dynamic, revolutionary, revelatory, perhaps even miraculous factor in radically theological thinking even of very different stripes. Indeed, negative or apophatic theology is at once the most traditional and the most radical of theologies: it spans and unifies these mutually opposed orientations. It is there in the first emergences of theological reflection, whether in Hesiod and Parmenides or in Moses and the prophets: it is coded into the secret, silent rites of paganism and into the mysteries of monotheism alike. It also represents the perennial vanguard of religious thinking that periodically undermines all settled doctrines by returning to the Unknown from which they have been spawned.

Some manifesto-like collections of essays have helped to define the debate as a facing off against each other of modern and postmodern “secular” theology, on the one hand, and *post-secular* theology and philosophy, on the other. The latter has, in some regards, appeared as *anti-modern* in repudiating the mainstream, secular, modern Enlightenment which follows Kant. In introducing his edited volume *Secular Theology*, Clayton Crockett recognizes the intellectual sophistication of some of the proponents of the Radical Orthodoxy, but he accuses them of being conservative and closed to the modern – and especially the contemporary – world:

“[T]he conclusions of Radical Orthodoxy can appear very simplistic and one-sided [...] the wholesale rejection of modernity, secularity and philosophy in favor of what sometimes appears to be an idealistic and romantic notion of Catholic Christendom can be frustrating to thinkers and theologians with a much more complicated understanding of modernity and/or postmodernity. These conclusions can appear incredibly simplistic: mo-

dernity is bad, postmodernists deconstruct modernity but end up in nihilism because they accept the basic presuppositions of modernity; the only way out is a leap (salto mortale, death leap) back to a place anterior to modernity and all of its discontents.”<sup>2</sup>

Secular theology is then made out to be a far preferable alternative as a way of responding to the challenges of the modern and contemporary worlds “on a much deeper and ultimately more fruitful level.” For secular theology:

“allows a much riskier and transformative discourse to take shape, one which is not simply concerned to argue point by point with Radical Orthodoxy, but which constructively imagines alternative appropriations of Continental philosophy and constitutes more complex, nuanced and ambivalent understandings of secularity, modernity and postmodernity”.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, exactly the same claim, but reversed, as in a mirror image, is made by representatives of Radical Orthodoxy. *Their* more complex and differentiated understanding of theological tradition enables them to avoid the sweeping generalizations that have characterized the wholesale rejection of theological transcendence as metaphysics by contemporary secularist thought that leads inevitably to nihilism, since it (purportedly) undermines the basis of any affirmation of the real. Graham Ward praises “theological realists” for taking the more “difficult path” rather than falling into step with the “aesthetics of nihilism.” He champions anti-secular thinkers who are on a relentless quest for “another city, a kingdom of God, founded in diremption.”<sup>4</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy, working in this vein, has come out with some important collections of essays taking stances against secularism in theology and in culture more broadly. The manifesto-like volume *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* begins by raising its complaint against “the dismal promenade” of postmodern ontological nihilism. Secular thinking in the wake of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and the like – who are prime instigators for secular (a) theological perspectives – is blamed in broad strokes for the supposed decadence of postmodern culture. More specifically, in the introduction to their collection of essays, the editors John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward denounce postmodern secularism’s “lack of values and lack of meaning. In its cyberspaces and theme-parks it promotes a materialism which is soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic.”<sup>5</sup> Remonstrating against secularism and its evils as so many expressions of nihi-

<sup>2</sup> C. Crockett (Ed.), *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, New York, 2001, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> G. Ward (Ed.), *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, Oxford, 1997, xlii–xliii. Ward develops this idea further in: *G. Ward, Cities of God*, New York, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (Eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, New York, 1999, 1.

lism, they describe their project in a way that initially distances it from negative theology: at least as this type of theology is commonly construed, it seems to be conflated with the pervasive trends of a nihilistic secularism.

“[N]or does it [the project of radical orthodoxy] indulge, like so many, in the pretense of a baptism of nihilism in the name of a misconstrued ‘negative theology’. Instead, in the face of the secular demise of truth, it seeks to reconfigure theological truth. The latter may indeed hover close to nihilism, since it, also, refuses a reduction of the indeterminate. Yet what finally distances it from nihilism is its proposal of the rational possibility, and the faithfully perceived actuality, of an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates.”<sup>6</sup>

The positive terms offered here are all anchored to an “indeterminacy”. Indeed this indeterminacy is how divinity can be apprehended, at least by us, who can only participate in its mysteriously harmonious ordering of things through time, not *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is “an indeterminacy that is not impersonal chaos but infinite interpersonal harmonious order, in which time participates.” This exemplifies the substantive imbrication of the negative upon the positive, and vice versa, in a manner that exactly mirrors the mutual co-implication at a methodological level between apophatic and kataphatic theologies ever since Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite defined them in this reciprocal way. The indispensable inter-dependence and cooperation of the negative and the positive methods of theology was patent already even in his precursor, Proclus.<sup>7</sup>

Radical Orthodoxy profiles itself as unequivocally affirmative of theology. It is openly defiant of secular modernity’s strictures against confidently professing one’s religion, and it claims that the suppression of a religious perspective condemns modern culture to emptiness and valuelessness. So Radical Orthodoxy is understandably reluctant to present theology – much less human thinking generally – as fundamentally and ineluctably negative. Negative theology is taken as the misconceived paradigm of the secular culture directly under attack, and in this relation it is censured as complicit with the very worst perversions that corrupt contemporary culture.

Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy cannot quite completely ignore its own deep indebtedness to negative theology, even while spurning the current forms of it as “nihilism”.<sup>8</sup> There is actually an extensive and deliberate use of apophatic or

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>7</sup> Proclus, *Commentarium in Parmenidum*, especially Book VII. Dionysius lays out this mutual dependence in “On Divine Names” and in “Mystical Theology”. The interdependence is emphasized by Marion, Turner, and Hart, as we shall see later in this essay.

<sup>8</sup> C. Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, London, 2002, monumentalizes Radical Orthodoxy’s allergy to “nihilism,” even while emphasizing the mutual implication of affirmation and negation, presence and absence.

negative theology by Radical Orthodoxy, in spite of a certain official position that tends to shun or at least circumscribe it. Indeed, negative theology *would* become nihilism if it took itself or simply negation or emptiness to be a transcendental hermeneutic that provided the “mathesis” or general framework for all knowledge. Then the human mind and its methods would have constructed a world around its own conceptions, taking “nothing” as the ultimate principle of the reality that it knows. This is indeed what Derrida and company are accused of doing: “The void itself as a static given assumed by knowledge is the *mathesis* par excellence”<sup>9</sup>. But that is exactly what Derrida is actually determined to avoid: he constantly warns against all appropriation of the Other to the measure of the Same and the known. Moreover, precisely *this* is what he profoundly shares with negative theology. The critical thrust of negative theology, which challenges by its rigorous critique all idols, including the conceptual idols that substitute themselves for the unthinkable God, lies at the very heart of Derrida’s deconstructive enterprise.<sup>10</sup> And in this regard, negative theology must be recognized as the best antidote to nihilism.<sup>11</sup>

The remonstrances against deconstruction as purely negative and nihilistic are surely a misconstrual of deconstruction and indeed of negative theology.<sup>12</sup> They miss the point, which admittedly became clearer as Derrida’s thought evolved, that deconstruction is not an attempt to master the world by any transcendental principle, but precisely to give that up. There is a turning to overtly religious thematics in Derrida’s thought with texts like “Comment ne pas parler”.

These pivotal Derridean texts raise explicitly the issue of whether Derrida’s thought reproduces the conceptual moves and rhetorical strategies of negative theology. Although he still denies or resists any such identification,<sup>13</sup> paradoxically Derrida’s denials can be read as a manner of saying and doing just what he denies he is saying and doing:<sup>14</sup> to this extent, they would realize what I call

<sup>9</sup> Milbank, Pickstock, Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *B. E. Benson*, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry*, Downers Grove, 2002, focuses on this aspect of deconstruction.

<sup>11</sup> *H. Corbin*, *De la théologie apophasique comme antidote du nihilisme*, in: *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, Paris, 2003 [1981], available in English as “Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism”, in: *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* [12], 2007, 59-83.

<sup>12</sup> *K. Hart*, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Philosophy, Theology*, Cambridge, 1989, is a careful argument against such misconstruals of deconstruction and its supposed undermining of theology.

<sup>13</sup> Key Derrida texts from this phase include *Donner la mort* (1993), *Sauf le nom* (1993), *Foi et savoir* (1996). The denial begins from: *Discussion autour de La différance*, in: *BSFP* 62, 1968, 82, and is confirmed notably in: *Comment ne pas parler: dénégations* (1986), in: *J. Derrida, Psyché. Invention de l’autre*, Paris, 1987, 535-595; trans. in: *H. Coward and T. Foshay* (Eds.), *The Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> *F. Nault*, *Déconstruction et apophasisme: À propos d’une dénégation de Jacques Derrida*, in: *LTP* 55, 1999, 393-411.



a negative theology, in as much as they evoke but then back off from a general, unlimited field of significance beyond what they can conceive by negating their own comprehension of it. As Derrida himself suggests, his constantly deferring to fully explicate deconstruction's crucial and undelimitable relation with negative theology may itself be considered a sort of performance of negative theology – once it is admitted that any rigid definition of the latter is impossible.<sup>15</sup>

It was contemplating the negative theology of Meister Eckhart and Silesius Angelus that led Derrida to salute the “democracy to come” and to avow that it would not be possible without what he calls negative theology. Derrida's envisaging in *Sauf le nom* a “démocratie à venir” along negative theological lines has, in some respects, a distant ancestor also in Nicholas Cusanus' negative theological prescription for harmonizing world religions through emptying them of inevitably conflictual positive claims concerning a transcendent deity that by its nature escaped being known properly by any religion.<sup>16</sup> Aiming more essentially at unblocking passages between different religions or ideologies than at harmonizing them, deconstruction like negative theology is not a platform or stance so much as a capability of always backing off from all positive forms of assertion in order to create space for what is always left out of account by them and is infinitely other than all that they can grasp. Why, then, does deconstruction (and with it secular theology) not embrace negative theology as at least a pertinent genealogical lineage for itself?

Derrida's long-promised disquisition on the question of deconstruction and negative theology, his address “Comment ne pas parler: dénégations” (“Denials. How Not to Speak”), in which he would presumably justify his denial of this lineage, draws attention to its highly symbolic venue, its taking place in Jerusalem at the point of confluence of the three major monotheistic religions that have all contributed mightily to developing negative theologies, especially on their mystical fringes. This address, which marks an important point of departure for current secular theologies, thereby places itself in the midst of a tradition that has been bound up with theology and with its constitutive apophatic negations and reversals all along. Derrida's discourse has lent itself to theological appropriations by secularists and anti-secularist alike. Various sorts of orthodox theologians, too, have found penetrating and liberating insights in Derrida's work.<sup>17</sup> Both the orthodox and heterodox or secular currents are beholden by their birthrights to negative theology; both indeed emerged historically from their cradles in the millenary apophatic cultures of monotheism.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Psyché*, 546.

<sup>16</sup> *Nicholas of Cusa, De pace fidei*, K. Berger/ Chr. Nord (Eds.), Frankfurt, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> *S. Shakespeare, Derrida and Theology*, London, 2009, chapter 7, inventories such theological responses to Derrida.

And yet both these contemporary theological tendencies continue to hold in suspicion and to shun at least what they generally understand under the rubric of negative theology. I detect here a hint that negative or apophatic theology may hold the keys to what really gives rise to thought – especially theological thought, especially when it is radical. The unmasterable origin of thought must be avoided in the interest of sustaining a discourse of a predictable and coherent or at least an assessable type, such as is required for the functioning of a public institution such as the academy. And yet secular and orthodox theology alike, following Derrida's lead, remain unaccepting and aloof from the negative theology that is nevertheless at work in the midst – and in the midst – of each.

The persisting ambivalence of secular theologians towards negative theology seems to come from its being associated with traditional metaphysical theology in the Neoplatonizing style of Dionysius the Areopagite and with its mystical – perhaps even mystifying – component. Thus it is suspected by secularists for reasons opposite to the ones that render it suspicious to Radical Orthodoxy. Whereas Radical Orthodoxy sees negative theology as too ambiguously close to heterodoxy and as too easily appropriated by modern secularist thinking, the secularists characteristically take negative theology as simply a subtle and sly reformulation of the old onto-theological tradition that they wish to terminate. And both are partly right. My contention is that negative theology is indispensable to both schools and indeed lies at their very heart as the secret source-spring of the creative intellectual energy released by each. Recognition of this requires each to gain insight into the strength and necessity of the other as not excludable but as intrinsic to its own most proper form of insight.

This requires, of course, a broader and deeper understanding of the apophatic than has typically been current, although high medieval and late- or post-modern cultures are particularly steeped in a pervading sense of what ineluctably escapes definition and opens thought and desire in the direction of its unnameable yet inexhaustible source. The negative way (*via negativa*) is a non-assertive way of relating to everything that is or is not – indeed, to anything whatever and to all things together. It does not abstract from finitude and the concrete, embodied things of creation – except in order to let them all come back freed from the conceptual constraints we ordinarily impose.

Much is being done currently by contemporary apophatic thinkers across numerous fields to bring out negative – literally “apophatic” (the Greek word for “negative”) – theology's potential for playing into a more radical affirmation of what is called the world, the body, and life and thus to counter the *merely* negative image of negative theology that is quite common in current theological literature. Negative theology is not just an abstract metaphysics of denial, nor is it condemned to remain simply in the desert. That, too, would become idolatry by limiting

apophaticism to a certain register of reasoning and a fixed imaginary rather than opening it infinitely without limits and without any irremovable conceptual boundaries. Hence we see the elaboration of apophatic discourses concentrating on bodies – on their social and political dimensions among other things – and on beauty. The current Renaissance of apophatic thought celebrates apophatic bodies and abounds in apophatic aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion: Apophasis and Public Theology**

My purpose here is to think through the implications of theology's apophatic bases and presuppositions especially in postmodern contexts for public theology – or rather for the potential of theology to open to a public dimension. I attempt to do so by bringing out the apophatic underpinnings of contemporary approaches to theology ranging from the most secular to the most anti-secular: what, in particular, do Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Secular Theology show us about the capability of theology for being represented in the public domain? If the apophatic perspective is essential to any theology that wishes to avoid becoming merely another idolatrous ideology, and more so than ever in our postmodern age, what does this suggest about the specific and indeed unique mode in which theology can and should inhabit the public sphere? Does apophasis have implications for how these styles of theological thought – and perhaps any type of theology today – can and should exert influence on public opinion and policy?

Apophatic vision in the tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scott Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart, but also of Moses Maimonides and Ibn al Arabi – of the Kabbalah and Sufism as well as of Christian mysticism – highlights the circumstance that God is everywhere and nowhere. God is present in anything and in everything that is in any way present, and yet apophatic thought insists on the fact that God cannot be identified with anything that is present or even with all manifest, worldly presences taken together. Apophatic theology is, in this respect, iconoclastic, negating all attempts to positively represent God. Accordingly, theology is pertinent to all that takes place in the public (no less than in the private) domain, and yet the theological is present always in a different way from any kind of fully determinate, objective, identifiable, vulgarly “public” presence.

Considered apophatically, all discourse about God is subject to a condition of self-qualification and self-subversion: it recognizes itself as inadequate to the ob-

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<sup>18</sup> Some recent samples of this literature can be found in *Ch. Boesel and C. Keller* (Eds.), *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, New York, 2009 and *A. Vega*, *Arte y santidad. Cuatro lecciones de estética apofática*, Pamplona, 2005; or in summary form, *Estética apofática y hermenéutica del misterio: elementos para una crítica de la visibilidad*, in: *Diánoia* 54, 2009, 1-25.

ject of its concern. The fact that each theological position or proposition needs to be corrected by others is brought to light fundamentally by the apophatic admission of the inadequacy of any monological discourse and of any finite statement in face of the infinite possibilities of what can be stated from unlimited contexts inhabited by unlimited potential others – all other potential participants in dialogue.

On this basis, we can infer that there are at least two reasons why cultivating an apophatic sensibility is crucial to the health of public discourse about what ultimately matters in human life and history.

1. Dialogue. Apophasis proceeds by negation. Every actual discourse is insufficient and in need of correction. All aim at what none can encompass. So only a multi-vocal approach through dialogue among different perspectives can approximate a discourse adequate to what surpasses any single discourse taken on its own.
2. Anti-idolatry. We live in an age of rampant idolatry in the public sphere so dominated by virtual representations of every kind. Apophatic sensibility is crucial to guarding against commodification and reification of religion in the marketplace and the media, which have become omnipresent and have practically supplanted God in the public arenas of postmodern society.

Acknowledging the apophatic as the silent and inarticulable basis of all our theologies requires giving up the claim to sufficient rational justifications of our choices and positions, but it does not entail renouncing reasoned reflection and dialogue. The point is rather to acknowledge that no reasoned discourse or principle can serve as the adequate foundation for our thought and action. We must remain open to “inspiration,” or to a “religious” relationship with others – which means to all others without restriction and ultimately to the wholly and even the holy Other. This relational posture does not answer our questions, nor can it unequivocally direct our actions. But still it is the best preparation for seeing clearly and even clairvoyantly – and thus for intuitively making sound judgments and decisions.

Such is the apophatic attitude, which, I believe, is the best response possible to religious issues (which encompass social issues generally) in our postmodern age of secularized religious pluralism. Rational argument and dialogue is more necessary than ever before, yet without the pretension to authoritatively resolve our dilemmas or to be able to ground itself autotelically. The ultimate ground of our life and thought is always beyond our grasp, nevertheless we can orient ourselves to it by being open to others around us without restriction. This ground for us *is* perhaps, after all, nothing but this openness and is perhaps realized precisely in our giving up all our attempts to achieve closure on our own: the Kingdom comes to us in being released from our grasp. When we let go of our idea of it, it

is there, for it consists just in this openness that alone can in principle be shared with others, without limit or exclusion.

Historically apophasis is closely related to mystical theology, which would seem to place it at the furthest possible remove from the public sphere. But is this mystical aspect of theology necessarily an intimately private aspect that can have no role in public debate? Or must public discourse itself not perhaps accord a central place to the incalculable springs of human motivation and inspiration that have been figured traditionally in the myths and symbols of theology? Such a “divine” origin or purpose for human activity in history cannot be positively asserted in definite terms that are not mythical or symbolic, and yet it must be allowed for: it manifests itself at least negatively in what exceeds all our concepts and definitions and in the inexhaustible variety of figurations that human beings can propose for their experience of their ultimate ground.

For this reason, theology is crucial in public affairs: its special and indispensable vocation is to preserve inviolate the precinct of what humans cannot define or determine. Nevertheless, the problem remains that theologies typically present uncompromising and incompatible absolutes. Different religions, notably Christianity and Islam, find themselves locked in numerous death struggles all around the world today. Yet, not in their doctrinal content and definitions, but in their inspiration from something *beyond* what they can discursively grasp, they share a common vision of the oneness of humankind and of creation in the image of one ungraspable, unnameable God. Only to the extent that they learn to find their own deep truth in what they do not and cannot as such articulate in their respective theological languages will they be able to act on the public scene in a spirit of mutual exchange and amity with one another, as well as with other faiths and non-faiths.

This idea of a public exchange about ultimate concerns entails a pluralism that allows for absolutes, yet does not impose any one interpretation or immoveably fixed articulation of the ultimate and divine source and goal of human life. No particular *discourse* is held by apophatic thought to be similarly binding for all, even if all aim in their different languages at what may well transcend human authority in order to assert a claim that is, in effect, divine. An unconditional respect and reverence for oneself and for all others is arguably a condition inherent in the effort to communicate and in human community *per se*.

Public theology, I submit, in an apophatic vein, finally is a theology that belongs to no one: no one can set its terms definitively. “Public theology” stands for the openness of this very denomination to all potential participants in dialogue in the open forum of the public square.<sup>19</sup> This, to my mind, is the crucial mission of

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<sup>19</sup> An exemplary dialogue in something of this spirit between Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas,

public theology: not so much to define exactly what *it* is over against other current forms of theological discourse, such as “political theology” or “postmodern theology” or “confessional theology” or “academic theology”. There are certainly significant nuances of difference in each of these labels, yet what is crucial is that any rubric remain open to redefinition in new contexts such as are brought to the table by all eventual participants in a discussion circling around the open space or topos of “public theology” – of theology as a vital public concern, as what concerns us all in our unlimited relations with all others and even with what remains to us wholly Other – even and especially when approaching us in inimitable intimacy and grace.

### *Acknowledgment*

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