

## Faith And Experience: X The Incomprehensibility Of God

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Traditional christian theology draws on a remarkable number of terms to express its conviction that God is beyond reach of human concepts and language. More than forty different words have been noticed in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, referring to the incomprehensibility of God in one way or another.<sup>1</sup> Some of them derive from scripture, others from Philo, others from Greek philosophers; some of them find their way into the liturgical texts of eastern christendom. They leave us in no doubt that it is radically impossible for the mind of man, or of any other creature, to fathom God. "The being of God is incomprehensible to the whole creation", as Chrysostom concludes.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, the theological tradition of divine incomprehensibility overlaps to a considerable extent with the kind of philosophical speculation we have been considering in the previous articles. But the theologians have their own slant on the matter, and it is with this that we shall be concerned in this article.

In the first place, the theologians are convinced that it is an essential part of christian doctrine to assert that God is unfathomable; it is part of revealed truth.

This comes out in the orthodox response to the claim made by the Anomoeans in the fourth century. Apparently they were saying, "I know God just as he knows himself".<sup>3</sup> Eunomius is quoted as saying, "God knows nothing more of his own essence than we do".<sup>4</sup> This provoked St John Chrysostom to preach a series of sermons in Antioch on the incomprehensibility of God's nature, as being an article of christian faith. Though he does sometimes use simple arguments of a more philosophical kind, he concentrates chiefly on scriptural and doctrinal evidence.

For instance, he uses I Timothy 6:16, which describes God as "dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see". "Notice", says Chrysostom, "the accuracy and precision of Paul's language. He does not say, 'being unapproachable light', but, 'dwelling in unapproachable light', to make you realise that if his dwelling-place is unapproachable, he who dwells in it must be even more unapproachable. . . . Nor does he say, 'dwelling in unfathomable light', but, 'unapproachable', which is more than 'unfathomable'. 'Unfathomable' is used of something which can be investigated and probed but not fully comprehended by those

who explore it; 'unapproachable' means that you cannot even make a beginning of investigating it, you cannot even get near it. A sea is said to be unfathomable when divers let themselves down into it and reach a certain depth, but cannot find the sea-bottom. But it is said to be unapproachable if you cannot even begin to investigate it".<sup>5</sup>

In Chrysostom's view it is the ultimate in madness to insist on wanting to know what God is in his own essential being.<sup>6</sup> His greatness (which is taken to be derivative from his being) is unlimited; how then can any bounds be set to his essence to make it comprehensible?<sup>7</sup> We ought to be content to worship, and not pry into God.<sup>8</sup> To claim to know all about God is not only mad, it is sinful; it is to set ourselves outside the limits appointed for us by God at our creation, like Adam who lost the glory that he had because he wanted a greater glory that had not been granted him.<sup>9</sup>

Even the greatest prophets confess that they do not fathom God. Even St Paul, who had received greater grace than they, admits, "I have not comprehended",<sup>10</sup> and Chrysostom argues that he must be referring to knowledge of God and not to moral perfection.<sup>11</sup>

"What?" he imagines someone objecting to Paul, "You have Christ speaking in you, and you say, 'I have not comprehended?'" To this Chrysostom provides the answer: "It is precisely because I have Christ speaking in me that I say this; this is what he himself has taught me". "Similarly," he goes on, "unless these people are totally devoid of the assistance of the Spirit and have completely banished his activity from their souls, they would not reckon that they had grasped everything".<sup>12</sup>

It is, then, part of the teaching that we have received from Christ that God is beyond our comprehension. The God who is revealed to us by Christ is precisely a God who is hidden. We shall therefore misunderstand revelation unless we appreciate that it does not eliminate the hiddenness of God. If Christ is the *visibile Patris*, he discloses at the same time that the Father is invisible; to see Christ truly involves recognising the Father as the *invisible Filii*.<sup>13</sup> To hear the Word fully involves also hearing his silence.<sup>14</sup>

To claim to have a more exhaustive knowledge of God than this is to go against the way in which God has in fact revealed himself, it is to go against the conditions of our created existence. It is to repeat the sin of Adam

It was precisely to stop man from going against the conditions of his created existence that Adam was given the commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge. The commandment was intended to remind Adam that he was not his own master.<sup>15</sup> according to Chrysostom, God wanted Adam to abstain from the tree of

knowledge just for a short time, at God's command, as a way of acknowledging that everything that he had came to him by God's gift, including his own nature.<sup>16</sup>

And of course one of the blessings God wished to bestow on man was precisely knowledge of himself. It is man's tragedy that he would not wait for God to bestow such knowledge in his own good time; instead he rushed in and helped himself, with disastrous results.<sup>17</sup>

Two related but separable themes emerge from christian reflection on the story of the Fall. One, evidently, is that it is important for man to recognise his creatureliness and his dependence on God. But also we find a conviction, deeply rooted in scripture, that it is dangerous for any creature to intrude uninvited on the mystery of God's essential being.

There are several passages in the Old Testament which bring out the dangerousness of God, showing that it is only safe for us to approach God on his terms. Even if our motives are good, that will not protect us if we meddle in God's affairs in ways which he had not himself laid down. Think of poor Uzzah, who tried to support the ark of God when it looked as if it was going to be spilled, and was struck down dead for his pains (2 Sam 6:6f).

It becomes a commonplace of christian thought that God has to temper himself to our capacity, and that if we try to approach him by any other means than his own condescension to us, we shall succeed only in destroying ourselves. As the Odes of Solomon put it, "He has generously shown himself to me in his simplicity, because his kindness has diminished his greatness".<sup>18</sup>

This theme is richly developed in some schools of gnosticism, but it is originally part of the common inheritance of the church. The Tripartite Tractate discovered at Nag Hammadi says, "The Father, in accordance with his exalted position over the Totalities, being an unknown and incomprehensible one, has greatness of the sort and magnitude, such that if he had formerly revealed himself suddenly to all the exalted ones among the aeons who had come forth from him, they would have perished. Therefore he withheld his power and his ease within that which he is".<sup>19</sup>

In Ptolomaeus' cosmology, this crazy world in which we find ourselves is the result of the junior aeon, Sophia, rushing headlong into a "search after the Father", because she "wished to comprehend his greatness. Since she was unable to do this, because she had undertaken an impossible task, she was in very deep distress".<sup>20</sup> With reference to the same doctrine, Theodotus says, "The aeon which wanted to grasp that which is beyond knowledge, fell into ignorance and formlessness. Because of this it produced Emptiness of Knowledge".<sup>21</sup>

"No one can come to the Father except through me", our

Lord says (Jn 14:6). To attempt to reach the Father in any other way is ruinous. According to Irenaeus, this is why the Jews went astray from God: "not receiving his Word, they thought they could know God through the Father himself, without his Word, that is, his Son".<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus here, like Justin before him,<sup>23</sup> is quite clear that God's self-revelation has always been through his Word. There is no question of any Old Testament revelation of the Father apart from the Word. If the Jews do not recognise the Word of God, then they cannot be said to know the Father either.

Justin extends the same principle to apply also to such pagans as may be said to have had some true knowledge of God. It was the Word (*Logos*) of God working in their rationality (*logos*) that brought them to such knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

This means that there is no real knowledge of God recognised as such apart from God's revelation of himself in his Word. Apart from him, God remains elusive, beyond our grasp altogether. Thus Origen, commenting on Celsus' appeal to God's inaccessibility to human reason (*logos*), makes an important distinction: "If this refers to the *logos* which is in us . . . then we too will say that God is inaccessible to it. But if we bear in mind 'In the beginning was the *Logos* and the *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God' and insist that God is accessible to this *Logos*, and that he is grasped not only by him but by anyone to whom he reveals the Father, then we shall deny Celsus' claim that God is inaccessible to *logos*".<sup>25</sup>

We must, of course, beware of reading into this discussion debates which arose much later about the validity of natural theology. The patristic insistence that God is known only through his self-revelation in Christ does not, of itself, rule out the possibility that the human mind can, by its own powers, discover that there is a God, which is the proper conclusion of natural theology, together with sufficient characterisation of God to give some meaning to that word.<sup>26</sup> The patristic discussion is far more concerned to clarify the nature and implications of the revelation we believe we have received in Christ.

Within this discussion, as we have seen, the elusiveness of God is inextricably linked with Christology. It is because we cannot grasp God on our own that we must depend on his revelation of himself in Christ; but equally it is always in the light of his incomprehensibility that we must understand this self-revelation.

Origen draws our attention to two related ways of misunderstanding Christ. There are those -- and Origen supposes that this includes the majority of believers -- for whom Christ means simply the incarnate Christ, with no reference to his being apart from the Incarnation.<sup>27</sup> And there are those who seek no God beyond the *Logos*, making him the Father of all.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, there is an

inadequate appreciation of the structure of God's self-giving. To fail to see the Godhead within the Incarnation is to miss what Christ is giving and showing us; and to fail to see that Christ, the *Logos*, is what he is only because of his Father is again to miss the ultimate mystery of truth and life. Christ grounds us in truth and life only because he is "with the Father".<sup>29</sup> He points us beyond himself, and is our salvation precisely in making it possible for us to be joined, in and with him, to the Father.

Within revelation, then, there is a vital principle of the non-self-sufficiency of revelation. It proceeds from the Father and leads us to the Father. Not that we have any access to the Father apart from revelation: only there is the danger that revelation will become opaque, disclosing only itself and not confronting us with the mystery of the God "whom no man can see".

The elusiveness, the incomprehensibility, of God thus becomes an essential hermeneutic principle within revelation. And it is a principle that is, indeed, well grounded in the revealed word of God in scripture. Most striking is, perhaps, the correction that we find in Exodus 33. If we stick to the Masoretic text for the moment, we are told in verse 11 that "the Lord spoke to Moses face to face". In verse 13 Moses says to the Lord, "Now, if I have found favour in your eyes, make me know your way so that I may know you and so that I may find favour in your eyes. And see that this nation is your people." The Lord replies, "My face will go (i.e. with you?) and I will give you rest". Then in verse 18 Moses again asks God, "Make me see your glory", to which God replies, "I shall make all my goodness pass before your face, and I shall proclaim my name. The Lord, before your face, and I will show favour to whom I will show favour and be compassionate to whom I will be compassionate. But you cannot see my face, for man will not see me and live. See, there is a place by me, where you will take your stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I shall put you in a hole in the rock and I shall lay my hand over you until I have passed by. Then I shall take away my hand and you will see my back, but my face will not be seen". (I have translated this passage very literally to bring out the importance of the word "face", which tends to disappear in more idiomatic renderings).

It certainly looks as if this strange passage, as we have it here, is intended to make sure that we do not misunderstand what is meant by the Lord speaking to Moses "face to face". There seems to be an internal correction going on.

But the embarrassment at the idea of any man seeing God's face comes out even more clearly if we look at the textual variants. The Septuagint makes Moses ask, in verse 13, "Show me yourself; let me see you in knowledge" (*gnostōs idō se*), and in verse 18 again the Vaticanus MS makes him ask, "Show me your-

self". In verse 13 the Vulgate has, "Show me your face, so that I may know you". This makes most sense of the passage as a whole.

In verse 14 the Septuagint makes God say "I will go before you", in response to Moses' "Show me yourself", and this seems to point forward to the revelation of God's back. It looks as if the whole story is meant to show what Moses' intimacy with God means: God is constantly going ahead, never abandoning his people, but equally never simply "face to face" with them. That is what it means to be "face to face" with God!

The embarrassment is more or less removed in the Targum. Verse 11 becomes, "And the Lord spoke to Moses speech to speech". And verses 22 and 23 explain that what Moses was shown, when he wanted to see God's face, was "hosts of angels".<sup>30</sup>

There is an interesting further illustration of how "Man shall not see God" works as a hermeneutic principle in Jewish theology in a discussion in the Talmudic *Yebamoth*, concerning the apparent contradiction between the text from Exodus 33 and Isaiah's claim *I saw the Lord* (Isaiah 6:1). The conclusion is that 'I saw the Lord' is to be understood in accordance with what was taught. All the prophets looked into a dim glass, but Moses looked through a clear glass".<sup>31</sup> The Soncino editor is surely right to interpret this with reference to the tradition that Moses had a uniquely clear prophetic insight,<sup>32</sup> which enabled him to realise that God cannot be seen; the other prophets *imagined* that they saw God. Quite clearly "I saw the Lord" has been interpreted in the light of "Man shall not see God" taken as an unchallengeable principle of exegesis.

To track this principle through the whole course of christian theology would be a task far too massive to undertake here. Instead, I propose to take just one writer, who has, for our purposes, the added advantage of not being much influenced by philosophy: Ephrem the Syrian. And I shall take only one of his works, the Hymns on Faith, most of which constitute part of his habitual polemic against the Arians.

Ephrem shows little interest in the specific doctrines of Arianism; the main thrust of his attack is methodological. The whole attempt to probe the nature of the generation of God's Son fills him with horror. Indeed, he sees in it the typical flowering of intellectual arrogance: "Rivers end up in the sea and foolhardy men all end up investigating the begetting of the Son".<sup>33</sup> It is not that Ephrem disapproves of all intellectual curiosity; but there are some questions that simply cannot profitably be asked. "Blessed is the man who has made for himself scales of truth, day by day, and weighed all his questions on them to prevent himself from asking superfluous questions" (2,10) "Daniel was more of a thinker than any other of the righteous, but when he heard that the world was sealed in hiddenness, he sealed his mouth with silence and set

a limit to his questions. . . . Knowing that he was a man, he asked about what belongs to humankind and worshipped what belongs to God". (47,8) Picking up the Old Testament theme of the dangerousness of God, Ephrem reminds us how important it is to stay within our appointed limits: "Great was the alarm when suddenly the sons of Aaron were burned up. They had rashly introduced strange fire and were burned. Who could escape the mighty fire, if he introduced within the church strange enquiries? There is room for discussion in the church, but only that which follows closely what has been revealed, not the kind that enquires into what is hidden. Uzzah the high priest was thrown down when he went to support the ark. He did not do what he had been commanded to do, but had done what was not commanded. He was told to carry the ark on his shoulders. He stretched out his hands to support that power which supports everything. He thought the ark was going to fall; when he supported it, it killed him. Do not worship the Holy where you have not been commanded to. Uzziah worshipped it and his worship was an insult. Do not desire to insult the First Born by being a questioner demanding truth. Do not think that faith is about to fall. It is faith which supports those who are fallen. Do not try to support it like Uzzah, in case it destroys you in anger". (8,9-11)

In one passage Ephrem sounds like a fourth century Wittgenstein: "What can be said and expounded, what is easy to investigate, what is open to discussion and interpretation, it is with that that the mouth has some relationship; the mouth is the expounder of its own kind. But what is beyond any possibility of discussion and interpretation is delimited by silence. Our understanding has no affinity with its hiddenness". (39,5)

Immediately after this, Ephrem indicates why he finds the Arian enterprise so misguided. He quotes the Arians as saying, "There is no way that God can beget". On this he comments, "Your 'no way' condemns you. If you investigate him, then not only is the fact of his begetting too hard and difficult for you, you will not even believe in his existence. It is not a matter that can be discussed whether it is or is not possible for him to beget; he is Lord of all possibilities". (39,6)

The attempt to say what God can or cannot do presupposes that we can know all about God, and that is absurd. It is not so very different from complete unbelief, in fact. "Anyone who dares to probe is much the same as an unbeliever. . . . Do not be surprised at what I say. Compare the two carefully: the one shies away from his Godhead, the other, with his probing, tries to make God small". (23,2-3)

To try to fathom exactly what it means to talk of God's "Son" inevitably means trying to fathom exactly what God the

Father is, (5,14) and that is absolutely impossible for any creature to do. The Father is fully known only to his Son, (3,15) and so the only authentic "investigation" of the Father is "in the lap" of the Son, contained in him. (4,17) That is to say, we can only probe the Father by accepting what the Son shows us of him.

To suppose that we can somehow explore the Father independently of Christ is simply to misunderstand completely the relationship between God and creation. For a creature to try to encompass God would be like trying to measure the ocean with a fistful of rulers. "If all the measures in the world were to go into the sea, they would be easily defeated and would not be equal to its size. It would enfold them, they would not encompass it. And of course that does not mean that the sea does not exist. It is because it does exist that idiots venture into it to measure its waters. Anyone who could search it out would have to be one who could encompass it. Any knowledge that was in a position to encompass the All-knowing would be greater than he, because it could measure him entirely. Anyone who had searched out the Father and the Son would be greater than both. God forbid that it should ever come to pass that the Father and the Son were fully investigated and that dust and ashes were to be raised up to such heights!" (9,15-16) "Who on earth could channel the streams of mysteries through his own mind?" (42,1) "It is impossible for there to be in creation a container big enough to envelop the Greatness (of God)". (70,20) "If God were to make a container capable of enveloping him, the creature would be greater than the Creator". (71,2)

Ephrem points out that it is not jealousy or meanness on the part of God that makes him inaccessible like this to our curiosity. (5,5;71,11-12) It is simply impossible for it to be otherwise. It is a mark of Godhead to be beyond our comprehension. (9,14) It would, as Ephrem says rather quaintly, be "upsetting" if it were otherwise. (32,7)

It is in fact envy that motivates the creature that tries to probe the secrets of God, thereby getting out of its proper place in the scheme of things. And the silly thing about trying to search out God's truth in this way is that even if you do find it, you will not recognise it. (17,1) If only we would be content to receive God as he has given himself to us, we should find ourselves far more intimately and certainly linked with him than we could ever be as a result of our own questing. "The Lord is closely bound to what is his, both far and near. They seek him, when he is carrying them! They think that he is distant, far away, when all the time they are held as if in the hollow of his hand!" (72,23-4)

It is interesting to compare this with de Caussade's strictures on "seeking for God". "What is the secret of finding this treasure, this mustard seed, this coin? There is no secret at all. The treasure



is everywhere, offering itself to us at all times and in all places".<sup>34</sup> "You seek God, dear soul, but he is everywhere! Everything declares him to you, everything gives him to you, he has passed beside you, around you, within you, across your path, he stops there, he is looking for you. Ah, what you are looking for is the idea of God, not just his reality".<sup>35</sup>

Ephrem too is aware of the risk that we shall succeed only in producing a false god with all our searching for God. "Admonish your thinking, do not let it go whoring, in case it brings to birth for us a non-existent Messiah and denies the one who does exist. Be careful not to build an idol with your probing. Beware of forming in your mind a bogy of your own intellect, the offspring of your own thinking".<sup>36</sup>

Our minds can only operate properly in the context of what is given. If we refuse what is given our thinking is bound to be vacuous, because it will have nowhere to start and it will have no way of knowing when it has arrived somewhere. "If you were to try to investigate the being of God, all that would result would be an aimless wandering. Where would you begin, where conclude? You weakling! From beginning to end there is repose for anyone who travels on the King's Highway. God's being has no beginning and no end and is therefore problematic for those who want to seek it. If you doubt the truth that you have grasped, then you will be poured out as a drink for error, which is as thirsty as a desert. If you bother yourself with the mysterious consideration of his greatness, your discussion of it will become a mighty sea storming against you. Let faith be your ship, sail in his scriptures like a mariner from port to port. Do not go sailing on his sea except in his scriptures. Give thanks to his name that he has made his havens so numerous in his ocean. In his love he disregards himself and becomes small, for all his greatness. For those who are too feeble to sail on his sea he becomes a modest brook. But again in his love he becomes a sea for traders who are in need of treasure".<sup>37</sup>

Scripture gives us all that we need; it is an inexhaustible source of nourishment for us, whether our capacity be great or small. "Who is capable of comprehending all that there is to be found in even one of your words, O God? ... If anyone is lucky enough to hit upon one of its treasures, he should not go and think that there is no more in the word of God than what he has found.... The man who is thirsty enjoys his drink; he does not get annoyed if he cannot drain the fountain dry. Let the fountain defeat your thirst, rather than your thirst defeating the fountain".<sup>38</sup>

Since we cannot get at God independently of his revelation of himself, it is foolhardy to abandon his words and seek others of our own. "I never went astray after men like them, to speak like them, because I saw that they named our redeemer with names,

other names, which were not written. I abandoned what did not stand written, and kept to what was written, in order not to lose what was written for the sake of what was not written. God made water and gave it to the fish to use. He wrote books and gave them to men for their profit. The one is a clue to the other. If fish go beyond their appointed path, they leap out to their own bane; and if men go beyond the limits which are set in scripture, then their investigations prove their death".<sup>39</sup> Scripture must be the acid test for all our words,<sup>40</sup> but we are in no position to test the words of scripture.<sup>41</sup> It is not for us to comment on whether he has spoken appropriately or not.<sup>42</sup> "When you are thirsty, the best thing to do is to drink the water; let us not start trying to measure the well instead".<sup>43</sup>

But it is by no means the solution to all our problems just to stick to the words of scripture. Ephrem is well aware that the Arians are enthusiastic quoters of biblical texts. Indeed, one of his terms of abuse for them is *sâphrê*, the New Testament word for "scribes", aptly rendered "Schriftgelehrten" by Beck.<sup>44</sup> A wrong use of scripture simply leads them to produce a new kind of idolatry.<sup>45</sup> Just as other idols are made out of natural objects, their idols are made out of texts of scripture.

It is therefore important to know how to use the bible. And, in Ephrem's view, a crucial factor is precisely the appreciation of the transcendence, the incomprehensibility, of God. If God is to address us at all, it must be in words and symbols that we can understand; but we must not reduce God to being no more than what our words and symbols can convey. "He who is true put on an image; fullness was there within it, but his radiance was covered by our form. The form was indeed not devoid of his greatness, but all the same, the picture was not the Godhead".<sup>46</sup>

God clothes himself in all kinds of images for our sake, but the very diversity of images, many of them not compatible with each other if taken literally, should alert us to the fact that "the image is not an exact representation of his essence".<sup>47</sup> Taking up an idea found also in Origen, Ephrem supposes that even the incarnate Christ kept changing his appearance, "going from one form to another to teach us that he has no form".<sup>48</sup>

If we are bewitched even by the words of scripture, it will lead us into blasphemy.

There is no way for a speaker to do without names of things which are visible, to represent to his hearers things which are unseen. If the creator of the garden (of Eden) clothed his own greatness in names belonging to the inhabitants of our earth, how much more can his garden be spoken of by means of our comparisons.

If anyone mistakenly concentrates his gaze on the names which the Greatness has applied to itself, he dishonours and misrepresents it by means of the metaphors in which it clothed himself to help him....

Your mind should not be disturbed by names. Paradise clothed itself in the language of your own kindred. It was no poverty of its own that made it clothe itself in your images. Your nature was so very feeble that it could not cope with its greatness. Its beauties were very much dimmed when they were represented in the feeble colours of your kindred.

Feeble eyes were not able to look at the radiance of its heavenly beauties; it clothed its trees in the names of our trees, its fig trees were called by the name of our fig trees....<sup>49</sup>

However it is still not sufficient simply to take note of the fact that our earthly words cannot do justice to God. According to Ephrem we have to make a distinction. There are indeed some names which God takes up for a while and then drops, to express some facet of his loving purpose; but there are other names which are “perfect and exact”.<sup>50</sup> These must be retained carefully and completely. If we omit even one of them, we shall lose them all, because they are all “bound up with one another and they sustain everything”.<sup>51</sup>

Here we seem to run into a real difficulty. It is, evidently, important that we should distinguish between the “exact” names of God and the merely metaphorical ones; but how can we? Ephrem has insisted throughout that we cannot get behind the images and words in which God reveals himself, and this means that we cannot make our own comparison between the images and the original. It is not in our power to evaluate the accuracy of scriptural imagery, because we have nothing to compare it with. How then are we to proceed?

Ephrem, unfortunately, does not answer this question directly. But it is fairly clear how he would answer it. And his answer, from one point of view, would be thoroughly unsatisfactory. He would simply tell us to have faith and, in faith, celebrate the wonder of God and his redeeming work.

But there is more to such an answer than we might, at first sight, suppose. The essential thrust of Ephrem’s presentation is that, since we cannot know God independently of his giving of himself to us, we cannot manipulate theology. And this means both that we cannot manipulate our own theological ideas with any likelihood of arriving at truth, and that we cannot manipulate the data of revelation. Either way we should end up with some

kind of false god. If faith simply meant that we are given items of doctrine, of theological vocabulary, and so on, which we could then play with in whatever way we liked, it would not really confront us with the mystery of the living God. In Ephrem's view, faith involves a far more intimate link with God, and a far more drastic abandonment of intellectual arrogance.

To use the language of later and very different theological disputes, Ephrem seems to be convinced that God's grace operates *within* our faculties. Christ, he says, is "the knowledge of our knowledge, the life of our soul".<sup>52</sup> In sinning, man attempted to uproot himself and make himself independent, so that his thoughts and words would be his own. But in fact the only result is that his knowledge becomes unknowledge and his words vacuous.<sup>53</sup> For all practical purposes he is dumb.<sup>54</sup> We are dependent on God to set our minds in order<sup>55</sup> and to give us a word which is capable of expressing divine truth.<sup>56</sup> Not that this word is alien to us; far from it, we are in fact pregnant with just such a word and if we do not bring it out we shall perish like a woman who cannot bring her baby to birth.<sup>57</sup> But we can never speak our word on our own, because it must at the same time be God's word. "Lord, may my tongue be a pen for your praise; let your merciful finger write with it a hymn that is profitable. Lord, the pen cannot write things just at its own pleasure, without someone taking it in his hand. May my tongue not slip and make me say unprofitable things without you".<sup>58</sup> This brings out a further significance of the recurrent image which Ephrem, like many another, uses: we cannot contain God, he contains us; we should not try to support faith, it supports us. It is in our constant recognition that we are derived from and dependent on God that we are saved from error.

But this does not mean that we are simply passive before the act of God. The fact that God must move us to speak and direct our speaking does not eliminate our human freedom. If we are a "harp" that belongs to God, we are nevertheless a harp which is free. We can and must be a harp which "sings to its God from its own soul and by its own free will".<sup>59</sup> If this is a paradox, it is one which is familiar to students of St Thomas.

God does not constrain us, when he subjects us to his divine order and purpose, because, mysteriously, we are not, in our true being, alien to God nor he to us. If he is ineffable and elusive, so are we.<sup>60</sup> If we cannot fathom the generation of God's Word, no more can we fathom or give expression to the production of our own words.<sup>61</sup>

Ineffability thus comes to serve as a hermeneutic key not only to scriptural or dogmatic statements about God, but also to our whole experience of ourselves, our whole understanding of all God's works. It is the undercurrent of mystery which holds the

christian world-view together because, in the last analysis, it is God's silence which is the bond of unity for everything that exists.<sup>62</sup>

(To be continued).

- 1 F. Cavallera & J. Daniélou, Introduction to Jean Chrysostome, *Sur L'Incompréhensibilité de Dieu* (Sources Chrétiennes, 1951), p. 19.
- 2 *De Incomprehensibili Dei Natura* IV 4.
- 3 *Ibid.* II 3.
- 4 Socrates, H. E. IV 7.
- 5 Chrysostom, *Op. cit.* III 2.
- 6 *Ibid.* I 4.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.* I 6.
- 9 *Ibid.* I 4.
- 10 *Ibid.* I 5.
- 11 *Ibid.* II 6.
- 12 *Ibid.* II 5.
- 13 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV 6,7.
- 14 Ignatius, *ad Eph.* 15, 2.
- 15 Irenaeus, *Epid.* 15.
- 16 Chrysostom, *in Gen.* 13,4; 14,4.
- 17 E.g. Theophilus, *ad Autol.* II 25; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 39, 7f; 45,8.
- 18 OS 7,3. I have slightly adapted the translation by Charlesworth.
- 19 *Trip. Tract.* 64, 28ff, quoted from the translation in J. M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.
- 20 Forster-Wilson, *Gnosis* I p. 129.
- 21 *Exc. Theod.* 31, 3f.
- 22 *Adv. Haer.* IV 7,4.
- 23 *I Apol.* 63; *Dial.* 127.
- 24 *I Apol.* 5; 46.
- 25 *C. Cel.* VI 65.
- 26 Cf. St Thomas, *Summa Theol.* Ia q. 12 art. 12.
- 27 *In Joh.* II 29.
- 28 *Ibid.* II 24.
- 29 *Ibid.* II 10.
- 30 Tg. Neofiti ad loc.
- 31 *Yeb.* 49b, quoted from the Soncino translation.
- 32 Cf. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* VI pp. 44f.
- 33 All references to Ephrem, unless otherwise specified, are to the *Hymns on Faith*. Here 37, 26.
- 34 J. P. Caussade, *L'Abandon à la Providence Divine*, ed. M. Olphe-Galliard, p. 27.
- 35 *Ibid.* p. 43.
- 36 Ephrem 44, 10.
- 37 69, 1-9.
- 38 *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, I 18-19.
- 39 64, 11-12.
- 40 44, 1.
- 41 54, 11.
- 42 46, 10.
- 43 67, 15.
- 44 E.g. 3, 11; 41, 7; 51, 9.
- 45 37, 12.
- 46 26, 13.
- 47 31, 3; cf. 31, 3-11; 26, 8-13.
- 48 31, 11. Cf. Origen, *Ser. in Mat.* 100.
- 49 *Hymns on Paradise* 11, 5-8.
- 50 44, 2.
- 51 44, 3.
- 52 19, 5.
- 53 37, 10.
- 54 37, 22. Cf. my contribution to *New Heaven? New Earth?*.
- 55 37, 8.
- 56 25, 4.
- 57 20, 1-2.
- 58 51, 6.
- 59 23, 6-7.
- 60 E.g. 1, 11; 1, 15-16; 3, 14; 56, 7. For the thought, cf. Gamaliel (quoted in *Everyman's Talmud*, p. 7); Philo, *Leg. All.* I 91; Theophilus, *ad Autol.* I 2; Basil, *Ep.* 235, 2.
- 61 57, 10.
- 62 54, 2.