

# Spirituality and Negative Theology

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Can God change his mind? If not, what is the sense in praying to him? If he is really immutable, does that not imply that he is inexorable, ruthless and uncaring like a blind cosmic force? And in that case, can we plausibly be expected to love him or to believe in his love for us? This is a perennial problem, expressed for instance in Morris West's impressive novel, *The Clowns of God*, by the abdicated pope Gregory XVII: 'Our Jesus who was of the seed of Abraham said that whatever we ask will be given us. We should knock at the door and clamour to be heard. But there's no point in that if there's no one inside—or if the one inside is a mad spirit whirling heedless with the galaxies!'

Here, on the face of it, there is a stark and hopeless conflict between devotional expectations and the postulates of classical theology. How can the eager Christian heart, yearning for a personal friendship with God, inspired by the biblical imagery of God's love-affair with his people, cope with a God who is changeless, unresponsive, atemporal, impassible?

Problems like this can be felt very deeply, and indeed it seems that this particular problem has been so deeply and generally felt that it is now widely assumed that it is religiously impossible to believe in the kind of God proposed to us by classical theology. It may therefore seem rather indelicate and perhaps impertinent to suggest that, after all, it is a false problem. Yet that is surely what it is. It is a real problem only because the false problem has been allowed to become deeply entrenched.

The real problem is that negative theology has been so largely misunderstood. As a result of this, devotion, not taught by negative theology to be cautious, and theology, clutching without understanding at certain relics of negative theology, have been left glaring at each other in mutual incomprehension.

The often lamented divorce between theology and piety probably took place in the twelfth century, and on both sides an abuse of negative theology seems to be involved. The newly developing theology of the schools had learned from Dionysius, as mediated through Eriugena, that none of our words can do justice to the reality of God, and had taken this as giving it a license to construct a highly technical theological language which could only be understood by properly trained professionals. Words in theology lost their contact with ordinary words, and, until a doctrine of

analogy was developed in the thirteenth century, there seemed little chance of ever explaining how it was possible to move from ordinary words to theological words. Negative theology served chiefly to bolster up what was in effect an arrogantly affirmative theology.

Piety, in response, began to revel in a 'school' in which there were no books, a school in which God was approached by love, not by understanding. Negative theology was appealed to to justify this move: God cannot be known, so we might as well stop trying to know him and concentrate on loving him. In the thirteenth century this anti-intellectual version of negative theology took control of the main current of Dionysian thought, and it was in this form that Dionysius was mediated in due course to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and to the world of sixteenth-century Spanish piety.

It has become commonplace to complain that the divorce between piety and theology has had a deleterious effect on theology, but I wonder whether a more accurate diagnosis of the situation might not lead to the conclusion that both theology and piety have suffered ill effects, not so much because of the divorce between them, but because of the loss of an authentic negative theology.

As has been excellently brought out in Paul Rorem's recent book on Dionysius, genuine Dionysian negative theology is inseparable from affirmative theology and the two of them, taken together, form essentially an exegetical technique. God is named by all names, but no name is his name. Properly understood, negative theology works as a corrective within all our language about God, but once it is accepted it simultaneously legitimises all our language about God. Precisely because there is no absolutely right way to talk about God, because all our words fall short of his reality, a huge range of more or less unsatisfactory ways of talking about God is positively desirable.

And the specific claim made by negative theology needs to be appreciated for what it is. To deny something of God is not to say that he lacks some property or quality or whatever, it is to say that he lacks the impoverishment which is inseparable from all properties, all qualities, as we ordinarily understand them. But any negative proposition about God has to be twinned with an affirmative one, and with the negation of the negation. Our God is a rock, but of course he is not a rock, but then it is not quite true either to say that he is not a rock. God is good, but we can never learn what his goodness means by considering good jam tarts, good music, good Christians. On the other hand, the goodness of jam tarts, music, Christians, is not quite unrelated to the goodness of God either.

The relationship that we have with God is inevitably shaped by the kinds of words and images we use to formulate it, and it is unfortunate if we take any of these words and images too literally or if we discard any of them too peremptorily. Both problems can be seen in fourteenth-century

English piety. The author of *The Cloud* was quite rightly worried by the danger of 'fantasy' involved in contemporary imaginative, affective meditation. The danger can be seen clearly a few decades later in poor Margery Kempe, who could not see what was under her nose because of the veil of devotional imaginings—the gorgeous young men of Rome were all Christ in his beauty, women with their babies were all Mary and Jesus. The sheer emotional strain which is so apparent in Richard Rolle is a product of this kind of religion. But the stark denial of all such imagery in *The Cloud* is hardly more satisfactory.

What is needed, surely, is to recapture the proper use of negative theology as an exegetical tactic. When we say that God is changeless we are not, simply, saying that he does not change. Any good Dionysian, to start off with, must say that he changes and does not change. He changes, for instance, in the sense that he communicates himself to us in time in myriads of different ways, not least through a variety of processes in which we find ourselves caught up. The richness of transience, which is so necessary to music and drama, for instance, is not denied of God; it is just too poor a notion to be adequate to God. It is the poverty of the notion that is denied by negative theology. But changelessness, too, is a poor notion. It suggests good things like constancy, solidity, unflappability, but also easily suggests less desirable qualities like stubbornness, unresponsiveness, indifference. The crucial point is that we must not be taken in by any of these words, but see if and how they can be used suggestively in our thinking about God. And we may want to say that God is stubborn—the doggedness of his love, his refusal to abandon his purpose, to go back on his promises, is a kind of stubbornness. It is imaged in the kind of stubbornness St Thérèse of Lisieux recognised in herself as a fault which turned her into a saint. Indifference rises about the petty, mawkish ways in which we can get involved in our own and each others' little messes. Unresponsiveness means a freedom not to be deflected by immature clamouring for attention, which is sometimes a *sine qua non* for mature love. And so on and so on and so on. Negative theology should keep us on our toes, so that we neither clutch at a little bouquet of words we find appealing nor throw away too readily words which we find, at first sight, unappealing.

One of the most damaging consequences of the loss of an authentic negative theology is that it becomes too easy for us to accept a few notions uncritically as if they could really tell us what God is like and what it is like for us to live in the light of his presence and his love. We can talk glibly about having a 'personal relationship' with God, but what does that mean? God is obviously not a person in any ordinary sense—he is three Persons in a rather extraordinary sense, but that is perhaps not what we generally mean. 'Personal relationship' understood negatively may be an important part of our language: God is not impersonal (like a cosmic force

or a supernatural dynamo) and he is not unrelated to us (he 'loves us', 'forgives us', 'cares for us'). But, if taken without due caution, 'personal relationship' can conjure up all kinds of expectations which will not be fulfilled. It is an image, at least a metaphor and perhaps even a sort of analogy, but no more than that. We should not try to infer from such a phrase what it is like to be the friend of God. That way metaphors get killed by earnestness.

All this labour of language can be disheartening, of course; that is why it is tempting to take short cuts and appeal to some kind of direct experience, and if we call it an 'ineffable experience' we appear to be justified and not attempting to fit it into language. But this talk of ineffability needs to be challenged. In one sense nothing has ever been discovered to be ineffable, in that human beings can always find something to say even about what they claim leaves them 'speechless'. Indeed, the more 'speechless' people are, the more they say, sooner or later. In another sense, everything is ineffable; the words 'banana split' are not a banana split and never could be and no amount of precise description will ever quite catch the full existential exuberance of a banana split. In most cases, we take it for granted that all language has an affirmative and a negative aspect, so to speak; we know how much we can expect words to do and do not ask for more. When we are dealing with God, there is a problem which does not normally arise in other connections. We can look at a banana split independently of our words, but we cannot just go and look at God. We know him only by his revelation of himself, and that means that we know him by faith, by the words of faith and by the rituals of faith. This is why idolatry is such an ever-present danger. No one has ever seen God, so we are tempted to take as God something which we can see or grasp. But, as Dionysius says, anyone who claims to have seen God has not seen God, but only something that is his. All revelation of God is a matter of borrowed plumage, and that includes all the experiences we might claim as encounters with God. Negative theology is the shield which protects us from idolatry, which reminds us that any conceivable encounter with God in this life is always an encounter veiled in creatures. God is always more than anything we perceive, feel, understand, talk about.

It is discouraging, in one sense, to keep on 'distancing' God like this, reminding ourselves that 'this is not God'. But in the long run, at any rate, it is more discouraging not to keep on 'distancing' God. If we identify some manifestation of God too naively as being God, then we confine God to a particular kind of situation, thereby condemning ourselves to considering him distant when we are not in that kind of situation. The painful remoteness of God, which people sometimes complain about, is an inevitable by-product of a restricted notion of what it means for God to be close.

The discipline of affirmative-negative theology, acting as a hermeneutic device within all our religious language, should actually serve to keep us out of prison. Let us take, as an example, the problems with which we started.

What is the sense of praying to a God who cannot change? If praying is exactly like asking another human being for something, then there is little sense in praying, because when we ask someone for something we are always likely to be hoping to initiate some process in that person's mind which will result in our getting some kind of favour. If we suppose that a changeless God must be like, say, an automatic cash-dispenser in a bank, praying would be like sticking your bank card in the slot; we might get something out of it, but it would hardly be a favour. But God is not changeless like that, he is not 'programmed'. He is above change because he has it all at once. Boethius' definition of eternity taxes the imagination way beyond breaking point, but it is something like that that is involved in divine changelessness: all the richness that we can only experience successively is there all at once. Any change would therefore be loss. The way in which we, in this life, know changelessness is by knowing the richness of change. Change is the proper image of changelessness, as Plato knew very well. We pray as part of the process of interaction which makes up our history, and, as far as we are concerned, it is part of a process in which change is all-important. God is behind and beyond the whole process, in that he is its source; our prayer is as real as any other aspect of the process, and he is doing us favours in answering our prayers. We pray for something and then we get it. Our prayer is answered. We have received a favour. Negative theology does not in any way prevent us from saying this. It reminds us, though, that God is not sitting up there wondering what to do next. If he were, then prayer would be a nightmare—I might be praying for rain, while you are praying for sunshine, and God would be caught in the crossfire. How can God listen to all our prayers at once? Prayer is mysterious and we should not expect to understand all its depths, because we can only see one end of it, our end. But we can lose our nerve over it either way, either because we take it too literally or because we do not take it too literally enough. If our theology is too negative or too affirmative, we end up in trouble. Prayer is like asking other people for things, but it is also unlike it. And we can, to some extent, see how it is like and unlike. And that must be enough for us.

But can we really love an unchanging God? Not if we think we know what 'love' means or 'unchanging' in such a sentence. But we do not. God is love, he is the yardstick of all love, therefore; but no one has ever seen God. We learn about love from the absurd range of ways in which we use the word 'love' with reference to things we do, more or less, understand. Negative theology reminds us that we do not know what

'love' really means, therefore we must respect *all* the evidence, being neither coy nor cramped. Torrid sexual imagery has often been used in the past with reference to the love between God and us, and we should not be afraid of it. But we have perhaps been too reluctant to see that God is not just like any other boyfriend or girlfriend you might have. We can learn about loving God also from appreciating what it is like to love crosswords, beer, flying, music, mathematics, mountaineering, children, frogs, poodles, teddy bears, aunts, grandfathers, enemies, friends, scenery, murder stories and so on ad infinitum.

'Unchanging' is perhaps not quite such a tricky word in connection with love, as we generally hope for unchangingness when we suffer from a love that bites deep enough. The threat of losing a loved person or holiday site or foodstuff can be very painful. There is no risk of God letting us down in that way. But then we expect our friends to react to us, which involves change. And then we are suspicious of them when they do react to us—do they really love us, if the first move always comes from us? All the ambiguities of change and changelessness constitute the evidence on the basis of which we can grope into the mystery of God's change and changelessness. To say that God is changeless is not to say that he is static; a negative proposition, in genuine negative theology, is not a disguised affirmative proposition. It is to say that he has all the advantages and none of the disadvantages of both change and changelessness. And if we cannot imagine what that is like, why should we expect to?

Both theology and piety have suffered, I have suggested, from the loss of a proper negative theology. Surely they have actually suffered in a very similar way. Theology became jargon, and spirituality became technique, whether the obvious technique of methods of prayer or the less obvious technique of mystical experience. What it all has in common is a certain stuffiness. And the answer is surely not to try to reunite desiccated theology with desiccated piety, but to reinvigorate both by an ebullient return to the sources. The bible, the centuries of Christian literature from the past, the liturgy, all our inheritance is bursting with imaginative use of words, meticulously analytic use of words, consoling use of words, threatening use of words, all sorts of ways of using words. The whole adventure of learning how to talk, how to think, how to see, is still open to us, if only we would stop marching. There is no right way to be in step, and there are probably remarkably few ways actually of being out of step.

The only caveat is that we must not invent our language. Negative theology is the underside of revelation. It is because there is a language which is given that we have something to interpret, which needs the delicacy of the affirmative-negative pair. The 'set text' for theology is always the bible, and the bible as giving the Church a language, which

262

she experiments with and, to some extent, hallows afresh in sacred formulae, whether dogmatic or liturgical. If we lose our negative theology, we shall probably get angry with some of this language and want to change it to suit our expectations and presuppositions. But then we shall end up only with religious Esperanto, a dead language without even a history. It does not matter if we get annoyed at the language that is given, as long as we stay within it, exploring patiently how it does work and how it does not work.

It is this adventure of punctilious language that secures the space within which we can grow as believers. The shifting surface of our lives will pick up the shifting patterns of the words of faith, never disclosing all truth to our understanding, but leading us on, teasing us, prodding us towards the light of God. Theology is alive because it handles the word of God; but it is alive for us because it uses human words. This is part of the mystery of the Incarnation. The Word became words. If our religious language loses touch with the wellspring of our ordinary language, then it cannot mean anything to us. This is why there can be no theology without philology, love of words.

Spirituality is alive because we have been given the Spirit of God. But it is alive for us because the Spirit of God nurtures within our minds and hearts a whole range of images, ideas, hints and propositions, which give us a view of life and of the world, objective and subjective, within which we live. If spirituality becomes a specialisation, it loses its divinity because it loses its humanity.

It is negative theology which frees us from the appalling seriousness which can afflict religious language and practice, by reminding us that it is all absurdly inadequate to what God really is and what our life with him is really about. But far from reducing us to silence and immobility, it frees us thereby to try out all manner of ways of talking and all manner of ways of behaving.

Orthodox belief gives us a solid framework, to stop our minds collapsing into their own paltriness; orthopraxy (meaning essentially the liturgy and the attempt to keep the commandments) gives us another solid framework, to stop us shrivelling up into our own feelings and private rites. Within orthodoxy and orthopraxy, negative theology provides the exegetical safeguard against turning the walls of our freedom into the walls of a prison.

As St John says, if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. And the same must be said if our hearts content us. Bad negative theology makes God smaller; but true negative theology always reminds us that God is more. And we, who are made in his image, become greater too, as we reach out into his mystery, not knowing too confidently what any of it means, but trying humbly to understand, not arrogantly claiming that we do understand nor petulantly abandoning the attempt with a facile plea of ineffability.