

UNIT 1A: ORTHODOX FAITH AND LIFE

2: God, Known and Unknown

God in Creation

There are two aspects to God in relation to creation of which we are part: that which can be known about God and that which remains permanently unknown. As human beings created by God, we struggle to differentiate between what can be known about God and what must remain permanently unknown during our lives on earth. Of course, we wish to know as much as possible about God; and it is right that we should strive to expand our understanding of who is God and how He guides us. As the Romanian Orthodox priest, Father Dumitru Staniloae, has cogently explained:

The created mind comes into the world with the impulse to know, and know the infinite One; this is proof that it is made for the infinite that He exists before it, if from the first moment of its awakening it presupposes that He exists. Somewhere it [i.e. the created mind] must find a reality to know that is much greater than itself, an infinite reality.... The mind is made to seek God; and finite realities ... should have the positive [purpose] of preparing it [i.e. the mind] successively for that great encounter, for the understanding of Him who stands at the final end of all things.¹

In other words, we are all created in such a way that we inherently seek to know God. Thus our creation in the image of God and our restoration in the likeness of God enables us to know God according to His self-revelation and supremely in the Incarnation of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ (John 1:18).

This on-going process of self-revelation through which God reveals Himself has been initiated by Him, not by us. Father Staniloae offers a challenging and practical approach to knowing God in a deeply personal way:

You cannot know your neighbour in a personal way only on your own initiative, or by an aggressive expedition. In order to know him he must reveal himself, on his

¹ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 33.

own initiative; he does this in proportion to the lack of your aggression to know him. How much more so with God, the Supreme Person and one who isn't clothed in a visible body; man cannot know Him unless He reveals Himself. So the first thesis of Christian spirituality is confirmed: The vision of God cannot be reached without a special grace from Him. . . .²

Paradoxically then, the possibility of our receiving God's specific self-revelation in Christ is founded on our awareness that He is to a considerable extent an unknown God, One that we seek, but One who chooses when and how to reveal Himself to each of us. St. Cyril of Alexandria is profoundly right to remind us that: "We explain not what God is but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God, to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge."³

We Have a Choice in How We Relate to God

There is also a more general revelation of God in creation which humans may choose to accept or deny thereby according to the wisdom and grace that is within them. In the book of Romans, St. Paul stressed the individual choice that each Jew and each Gentile could make in relation to God's plan of salvation for all mankind:

*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.
(Romans 1:20=23)*

Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century, perhaps even more so than in earlier centuries, the pull of a consumer oriented society can "strengthen our self-centred habits, stimulate our appetites and keep reinforcing our egos (and our pathologies), while the seed of personhood or

² Staniloae, p. 38.

³ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Sixth Catechetical Lecture*.

potential for being 'in the likeness' of God remains dormant with us."⁴ The Orthodox counsellor and therapist, Stephen Muse, is right to stress that: "It is only when the ego yields up first place in the scheme of things, that the soul can be nourished ..." and we can be changed from being "ego-centric" to "theo-centric, -- from being centred on ourselves to being centred on God."⁵ While it is true that the unknown God chooses how and when to reveal Himself, we too have a choice about whether or not to be open to receiving "the glory of the incorruptible God."

Understanding the importance of accepting that God is unknown whatever our personal deficiencies and inadequacies, there is still a sense in which 'that which remains unknown' is not excluded by sin but by the limitations inherent in the distinction in being between the Creator and the creature, as noted in the E-Quip lecture 1 of this Unit. St. Paul reminds us as well as St. Timothy that it is God alone who "possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honour and everlasting power. Amen" (1 Tim 6:16). Father Staniloae reflects that: "Our nature isn't made into the divine nature, because our created 'I' doesn't become the divine 'I'."⁶ In other words, the distinction between the Creator and the creature remains present however much or little we each discover of the unknown God.

Precisely because of the overriding reality of this distinction between the Creator and the created, as Christians we are placed in a situation that Father Staniloae characterises as being "of supreme humility, but likewise of supreme daring."⁷ St. Paul's affirmation, "I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20) --one of the most powerful verses in the New Testament-- is only possible once we have accepted that we live under the sovereignty of an unknown God who has created us:

In other words, my personality hasn't ceased to exist because I am conscious of it at the same time as I affirm it; my personality now lives the life of Christ. I am still a man by nature, but I have become Christ by the powers by which I myself now

⁴ Stephen Muse, *Being Bread* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2013), p. 156.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Staniloae, op.cit., p. 39.

⁷ Ibid.

live. This is the experience of the Christian on the highest peaks of his spiritual life.⁸

Remarkably, the awareness that God is forever unknown is essential if we are to know Him within the framework of living out our lives as human beings on this earth.

The Unknowable Nature of God and the Knowable Presence of God

How can we reconcile the unknowable and knowable aspects of God? All the references to the unknowable aspect of God in the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church concern His essence or being (*ousia* in Greek). All the references to the knowable aspects of God in these sources refer to His self-revelation, His theophanies in the Old Testament and supremely in the Incarnation of the Word and pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. When words are used to give an account of these manifestations they must be interpreted as stripped of anything creaturely or finite. In this way we avoid the idolatry that confuses the Infinite, God, with the finite, Creation.

In order to distinguish between God unknowable in His nature and God made known by His Presence it is not appropriate to use the idea that God “spills himself” out by degrees into His creation, because to do that would be to contradict that most basic belief in one God—namely that His essence is not divided and distributed. The distinction between God in Himself (his essence or being) and His Presence (energies) is needful in that it recognises that as creatures we can never know God “on the inside” (as it were) but only as He appears to us.

The Necessity of Both Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology

It is necessary when we talk of God to hold in tension simultaneously both the unknown in God and the known. Respectively, these approaches are known as apophatic theology, (in which God in His nature is unknown), and cataphatic theology (in which God in His self-disclosure or energies is known). Orthodoxy always first stresses what God is not, the province of apophatic theology in order that our words about God might not lapse into the idolatry of confessing a false god made in human images and concepts. Therefore, for example, **these statements** [below on the left] about God are unqualified and therefore, misleading. Qualified by [the] apophatic

⁸ Ibid. Note that any references to “man” in these E-Quip lectures should also be taken to refer to “woman” and the whole of humanity.

negations [on the right], however, they are more reliable; yet never perfectly reliable, not at least in this life: [words in parentheses omitted in verbal lecture]

God is great.

God has no limits.

God is Father.

God has no gender.

God exists.

God is not a being.

Notice how the negatives add transcendent otherness to what might mistakenly be understood as something created and, therefore, limited in the affirmations and certainly not God. Mathematically we might say that God is not even the final term in an infinite series. He is beyond all series, infinite or otherwise. Once the affirmations have been purged of all limitations they emerge in their true reference within the Scriptures in Tradition as so-called attributes of God: Eternal, All-Good, Omniscient, All-Righteous, Almighty, Omnipresent, Unchangeable, Self-Sufficient and many more.

Seeking to Know God: From Moses to the Trinity

Some have claimed that there are a very few affirmations that manage to capture the limitless otherness of God. A classic example is the so-called Tetragrammaton or, simply, God's answer to Moses concerning His Name spoken from the unburning bush (Ex 3:2). So sacred was this answer to the Jews that it could never be uttered. Alternatives had to be found ... *Adonai* in Hebrew, Lord, for example. The answer is difficult to translate from the Hebrew, *Yahweh*. "I am who I am," but there is a future sense in there as well, so "I will be who I will be." More simply we could say, "He Who Is." So, it is precisely because *Yahweh* is so empty of meaning if we look to anything in this world that it is so useful for pointing beyond itself to the reality of God. Yet, for all that, even *Yahweh* is a word, a created word. It can be no more than a sign even if it is the most ineffable and pure sign that makes sense to our created intellect. However, this is not the whole story. Christianity does not disappear in a mist of mystical agnosticism. In Orthodox iconography "He Who Is" is appended to the image of the Saviour. In our hymnography the unburning bush is typologically transferred to the Theotokos ... the birthgiver of God. The Incarnation literally puts flesh, our flesh, on "He Who Is." Henceforth, the Unnameable God has a name and a human reality: Jesus Christ. The Incarnation changes everything. It is the only but the inexhaustibly sufficient affirmation that we have.

Writing about A.D. 60, St. Paul's affirmation of "the invisible God" unites the search of Moses for this God he could not see with our search for the unknown God:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Col 1:15-20)

From St. Paul's affirmation of Christ it is but a short journey to the Trinity – one we are not going to follow in this Unit but it needs to be emphasised at this point that the necessary differentiations of the Trinity concern the hypostases, or, loosely, the Persons of the Trinity—Father Son and Holy Spirit. It is the essence or being of God that constitutes the unity and singleness of God. The final word, for now, lies with the Greek theologian, St. John of Damascus (c. 650-c.750), in his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1:8 in which apophatic theology plays a key role in seeking to know God:

Therefore, we believe in one God: one principle, without beginning, uncreated, unbegotten, indestructible and immortal, eternal, unlimited, uncircumscribed, unbounded, infinite in power, simple, uncompounded, incorporeal, unchanging, dispassionate, constant, unchangeable, invisible, source of goodness and justice, light ineffable and inaccessible; power which is not subject to any measure, but which is measured only by His own will, for He can do all things whatsoever He pleases ...; one Essence, one Godhead, one power, one will, one operation, one principality, one authority, one dominion, one kingdom, known in three perfect Hypostases, and known and worshipped with one worship." {Amen}.

Like St. John Damascus, each of us is confronted with the unity of apophatic and cataphatic theology, as we seek to understand the Trinity.

It is good that we should each live our lives affirming both the unknowable nature of God and the possibility of knowing—of experiencing to some small but significant extent—His presence in our lives. Yes, during our lives on this earth we will always experience a tension between what is known about God and that which remains permanently unknown. However, as we live out our

lives there is also the tension—the existential tension—between whether we choose to live egocentric or theocentric lives—whether we choose to be centred on ourselves and our fears and hopes, or we decide to focus our lives primarily on finding God. If we seek to find God, He will surely find us. If we genuinely wish to understand and explore how God is known and unknown, we must first make a personal choice to seek to find Him in how we live our lives in prayer and in action. Remarkably, the choice is ours; and it is in a very deep sense the choice itself that matters, not the intellectual results of our struggling efforts to know God. Let us all pray that we will seek to find God, who remains both known and unknown for each of us.

Bibliography

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