So many post-modern theologians are busy retrieving “negative theology,” with others labeling such retrievals as “misconstruals,” that observers might be tempted to conclude that there was, or is, such a single thing as “negative theology.” Having a convenient label can suggest that there was some thing, reified, corresponding to the name, and indeed one such thing. Yet anyone seeking a definition or just sampling the texts encounters a diverse array of pre-modern apophatic authors, a multiplicity of negative theologies. I here survey some of the diversity within the Christian tradition of negative theology and yet also favor one strand of that tradition relative to Christ, the incarnation, and the cross.¹

The biblical starting points make this a commonplace. “My thoughts are higher than your thoughts,” says Isaiah’s Lord. The divine is invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible; these are all negations, out of a recognition of divine transcendence. Early authors like Justin, Ireneaus, Clement and Origen of Alexandria all built on these biblical materials. God by definition transcends our words and concepts and capacities, such that all affirmations must be qualified and only negations are flatly true. So what? Or, rather, then what? Some theologians make significant moves after the negations, out of this apophatic awareness of the surpassing transcendence of the Infinite, but they make different moves, theologically, and those differences are my main theme here. In short, where do such negations lead?

All types of Christian negative theology, to start with their common ground, keep negations connected; they do not isolate some apophatic principle of God’s transcendence as if it were an independent epistemological truth. Negations stay connected, first of all, to affirmations, for there is something to be negated, some content to work with; even negative prefixes are negations of some specific word. Secondly, the negations are closely connected to the biblical texts, the words and symbols of revealed scripture, since both

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the negations and the words being negated are originally scriptural. Indeed a biblical symbol or metaphor shows the interplay of affirmation and negation: the symbol is both like and unlike God. Finally, these biblical negations stay connected to communities of faith, indeed liturgical communities. The Christian apophatic grows out of worshipping communities, not abstract inquiry. It is indeed a misconstrual of negative theology to consider the apophatic as if it were a free-floating epistemological principle for individuals, namely, to isolate it from the cataphatic, from its biblical origins, and from liturgical communities of faith.2

To isolate how theological negations can lead to different outcomes, I here propose three categories: the progressive apophatic, the complete apophatic, and the incarnational apophatic. Each has a central biblical source, a Greek Father, and later successors in Latin Christianity. How each finds echoes in modern or post-modern discussions is more than I can document here.3

_The Progressive Apophatic_

In his “Contemplation on the Life of Moses,” Gregory of Nyssa develops a biblical theme into an apophatic theology. Promised God’s favor and presence, Moses wants to see God; “Show me your glory, I pray” (Exodus 33:18). But what does it mean “to behold” God? Is it really “face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11)? No, says the Lord, “I will make my goodness pass before you . . . but you cannot see my face” (Ex 33:19–20). Moses is hidden in a rock, cleft for him; and after God’s glory passes by, he may look. “You shall see my back,” says the Lord, “but my face shall not be seen” (Ex. 33:23).

Here Gregory advances a profound and influential interpretation. Moses does get to behold God, not the way he or we might expect, but with an apophatic twist. That Moses sees God’s back or backside is neither inappropriately anthropomorphic nor absurdly crude, but calls for a spiritual interpretation, an uplifting or “anagogical” interpretation. Moses is being uplifted, ever higher, ceaselessly higher. As if on Jacob’s ladder, says Gregory, Moses “continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because
he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.”
Reviewing the life of Moses, Gregory charts the Mosaic ascent and ceaseless desire to keep ascending, even to this bold request to behold God. Here negation is gently implied in rising above one’s current level; stepping higher entails leaving the lower behind in a type of denial that is repeated over and over. As high as Moses may climb, as many rungs as he attains and then leaves behind, “he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more.”
Here Gregory’s apophatic becomes explicit: “the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics; [it] transcends knowledge; the Divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary.”

“This truly is the vision of God,” says Gregory, “never to be satisfied in the desire to see him.” To see God’s back instead of God’s face means not a static image of a physical back but the dynamic process of following someone. It means to follow where God is leading, for “he who follows sees the back.”

God is leading Moses still higher, ever higher, always leaving behind the lower steps in a progressive apophatic. “So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold Him; to follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God.”

This kind of dynamic negative theology recognizes that God is always beyond our grasp, our concepts, and our words, a recognition accompanied not by nihilistic despair but by the perpetual “hope [that] always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond.”

Thus, to see God’s back is to follow God ever higher, a gentle form of the apophatic linked to Gregory by Jean Daniélou under the term “epektasis,” or “perpetual progress.” This endless pursuing of the infinite and inexhaustible divine nature is what I am here calling the “progressive apophatic.”

Moses is the best biblical example, but Gregory also interprets the Song of Songs this way, and weaves Christ into both narratives. The bride, like Moses, wants to see the Lover’s face, but he passes by (Song 5:6), not to forsake her but rather to draw her toward himself. She advances “towards that which lies before her and by always going out from what she has comprehended.”

Of course, once the Song of Songs enters the picture, the apophatic is more than knowing and unknowing; Gregory’s theme of “epektasis” applies not only to progressive knowledge of God by unknowing,
but also to ceaseless desire and love for God. Negations thus lead to more negations, endlessly to ever “higher” negations. This kind of progress, a generic form of negative theology, was often linked to St. Paul's example of “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3.13).

With such a broad biblical pedigree, no wonder that this theme surfaces in many later authors, Greek and Latin, with no necessary connection to Gregory of Nyssa although his work did enter the Latin world in the early medieval translation and appropriation by Eriugena. Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, for a pair of examples, take up the theme of perpetual progress in the spiritual life; such progress is perhaps “epektetic,” in McGinn’s adjectival form, but it is minimally apophatic. For Bernard, the Pauline model of “striving ceaselessly” is largely an affair of the heart, endless desire rather than endless knowledge. William of Saint Thierry combines the intellect and love most expertly; for him the shared ascent of mind and heart is endless progress, perpetually leaving behind what has been known and loved. “Always to advance in this way is to arrive.”

Like his friend and soulmate Bernard, William usually applied this theme of endless progress to the desires of the heart. Yet he can also isolate the apophatic point about unknowing, indeed, regarding Moses in Exodus 33 as already seen in Gregory. When Moses was told “you cannot see my face,” this refers to the knowledge of the divine majesty, says William. “That knowledge is best known in this life by unknowing; the highest knowledge that a man can here and now attain consists in knowing in what way he does not know.”

There are many other authors, medieval and modern, who share an affinity to this way of emphasizing an outcome of negative theology, the “progressive apophatic” that recognizes God’s transcendence and thus the limitations of human capacity. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, built on this tradition, with explicit appreciation for Gregory of Nyssa. To give Gregory the last word in this section:

More is always being grasped, and yet something beyond that which has been grasped will always be discovered, and this search will never overtake its Object, because its fund is as inexhaustible as the growth of that which participates in it is ceaseless.
No particular polemics have accompanied this benign outcome of apophatic theology, that negations lead to more negations without end, but other authors took Moses’ ascent up Mt. Sinai to another end, with more controversial results.

The Complete Apophatic

After the “progressive apophatic,” here based on Gregory of Nyssa, the second expression of negative theology I am proposing is the “complete apophatic,” starting with Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius. This early sixth-century author knew the Cappadocian (and Alexandrian) tradition, but artfully disguised his debts. Like Gregory, Dionysius has Moses climbing higher and higher, leaving behind and thus denying the lower steps; negations lead to more negations, but after this temporary similarity there is a difference at the peak, in the darkness or cloud of unknowing. Insofar as the Dionysian Moses negates everything that is less than God, he completes his apophatic ascent and finds himself united with the Unknown God in the end. Negations lead ultimately to union with God. St. Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 indeed started with the “unknown God,” and ended up converting the original Dionysius and Damaris.

As a whole, the Pseudo-Dionysian writings convey a devout reverence for the transcendence of God, in biblical terms. “We offer worship,” opens The Divine Names, “to that of the divine which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible.” What immediately follows, however, is not a wise silence by itself, or flat negation, but a complex engagement with scripture according to an ana-gogical or uplifting interpretation that combines affirmation and negation:

With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible. We are raised up [uplifted] to the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us, with our beings shaped to songs of praise, we behold the divine light, in a manner befitting us, and our praise resounds for that generous Source of all holy enlightenment, a Source which has told us about itself in the holy words of scripture.
Dionysian apophatic theology, specifically in *The Mystical Theology*, can leave the misleading impression of an isolated and abstract principle that God is flatly unknowable. On the contrary, as I have elsewhere argued at some length, the Dionysian apophatic is paired with the kataphatic or affirmative theology in the interpretation of Scripture first of all. The idea that negations about God are simply true whereas affirmations always need to be qualified (*The Celestial Hierarchy*, 2) is all about interpreting the Bible. Such symbols, like a cornerstone or the wind, are both like and unlike God, and so are the human concepts that stem from such exegesis. This anagogical interpretation of “the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures,” furthermore, is not individualistic but communal, not abstract but concretely based on the Scriptures and the liturgy of the faith community. All three variations on the apophatic here proposed, including in this case Dionysius and soon Meister Eckhart, start with the positive contents of scripture in Christian communities of faithful worship and praise for the transcendent God.

So, Dionysius, like Gregory, charts the progress of Moses through purification and illumination, as he sees and understands, up to perfection or union, but then there is a difference. Gregory’s Moses never stops ascending, for his progressive apophatic is everlasting. The Dionysian apophatic is not perpetual, but completed, in that Moses does arrive, and it is absolute in that by negating and surpassing everything that is not God, Moses ends up in God, united to God. Breaking free of what sees or is seen, Moses

plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the wholly Unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.

After all the biblical interpretation of the perceptible and the conceptual, in the liturgical context of a worshipping community, the finale of the Dionysian apophatic is union with God. In the end, negation and silence is the direct way to the Unknown God, beyond words and thoughts. The apophatic is complete, not progressive, and
in ecstatic eternity, not everlasting time. It is also radically complete, for God is finally “not wisdom nor one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness; it is not spirit or son or fatherhood” (*The Mystical Theology*, chapter 5). Brief as its five pages are, *The Mystical Theology* invites extensive commentary, and I long ago offered my own, thirty pages worth. But in this context, I leave Dionysius instead with a quotation from the end of *The Divine Names*.

Following all of his philosophical interpretation of the biblical names for God, the Areopagite’s longest treatise also turns apophatic, and with the same turn to ecstatic union with God. He agrees with the scripture writers, he says, for

> their preference is for the way up through negations, since this stands the soul outside everything which is correlative with its own finite nature [i.e. renders the soul ecstatic]. Such a way guides the soul through all the divine notions which are themselves transcended by that which is far beyond every name, all reason and all knowledge. Beyond the outermost boundaries of the world, the soul is brought into union with God himself to the extent that every one of us is capable of it.  

The Dionysian apophatic culminates in union with God, beyond all affirmations and negations. Symbols and concepts, assertions with denials, have charted the way, but in the end they are all left behind. Negative theology, in this sense, does not deny God but seeks and finds God, by negating all that is less than the infinite God, including all finite words and concepts. No wonder that some later “mystical” theologians embraced the Dionysian form of negation, but only a few, for it is difficult to sustain the absolute apophatic by itself above and beyond the “progressive apophatic.” The best example, surely the best-known, is Meister Eckhart.

Skipping many centuries, and the thin Dionysian thread into Western Latin theology by way of Eriugena’s translation and comments, we come to a Dominican tradition of negative theology. Albert the Great is the key figure here, before Thomas Aquinas and his mountain of material, especially in Albert’s commentary on the Dionysian *Mystical Theology*. Introducing the Areopagite’s interpretation of Moses’ ascent up and into the darkness of unknowing, Albert is rigorously apophatic about it. As to lights and sounds and
words, “all these things have to be transcended, because none of them is what we seek in contemplation.”23 Albert maintains the Dionysian insistence that Moses is united with the utterly unknown God by knowing nothing, and does so without here adding love to the pinnacle as others did and do.24 Albert remains completely apophatic right to the end of The Mystical Theology, where the “transcendence of him who is above all [even] transcends all negation. The names which are denied of him are denied because of his transcendence . . . [and] his transcendence defeats all negation.”25

As launched by Albert and developed in Thomas, a Dominican trajectory then epitomized in Meister Eckhart applied the mendicant ideal of poverty to apophatic theology, not only owning nothing or wanting nothing but also “knowing nothing,”26 in the special sense later called “learned ignorance.” Eckhart very much liked and quoted the Dionysian caution about the “wise silence” that honors the inexpressible, and the idea that negations are true whereas affirmations are unsuitable.27 God is beyond all names and words, even “good” or “being,” since God is beyond our understanding. If you have a God you can understand, goes the Augustinian saying that Eckhart passes on, that’s not really God.28 Specifically exegeting Exodus and Mt. Sinai’s cloud, says Eckhart, “The meaning is then ‘Moses went into the darkness wherein God was,’ that is, into the surpassing light that beats down and darkens our intellect.”29 He here adds from the Areopagite’s Letter One, “Perfect ignorance is the knowledge of him who is over all that is known.”30 Here, with Moses and Dionysius, is Eckhart’s complete apophatic, and it means the famous “breakthrough” into God beyond God, the sinking into the nothingness of God. Love takes God with a garment on, namely, God’s goodness, but knowing and unknowing “peels everything away, and takes God bare,” yet “can never encompass him in the sea of his unfathomableness.”31 With the “negation of negation,” the apophatic is absolute, and that is how one breaks through to God, in the unfathomable sea. Angela of Foligno, Hadewich, Mechthild of Magdeburg and especially Marguerite Porete also spoke of the “abyss” in this way, as Amy Hollywood has pointed out.32 “Abyss” itself is a negation (a-byssum), but as a negativity regarding dereliction or abandonment, as McGinn argues,33 rather than an apophasis about God per se. To conclude with
Meister Eckhart: here, too, as with Dionysius, negative theology is not an abstracted principle of language or religious epistemology, but rather a way of interpreting Scripture, and within the community of faith. Although clearer on the Byzantine side, such as Gregory Palamas, Eckhart's best expressions of this complete apophatic occur, after all, in his homilies, namely, on biblical content and within a liturgical context. In this respect, the post-modern contender for expressing a complete apophatic, namely, Jacques Derrida, was right to distance himself from Dionysius and Eckhart insofar as they held on to the biblical content within liturgical communities, whereas he wanted no such kataphatic baggage. The Dionysian origins for this outcome of negative theology (that negations lead to more negations and ultimately to union with God) immediately came in for some vigorous commentary, exactly on this apophatic point.

The Incarnational Apophatic

When Dionysius took his apophatic method to the extreme (that God is not wisdom or oneness, divinity or goodness, not Spirit or Son or Father), this was too much for some readers, including the first commentators. In the Scholia, or marginal comments attributed to Maximus the Confessor, we read:

Do not let this chapter disturb you and do not think that this divine man is blaspheming. His purpose is to show that God is not a being among beings but is beyond beings. For if [God] himself has brought forth all beings in creation, how can he be found to be one being among other beings?

What then to do with this "apostolic" apophatic? Once you let Dionysius define the terms, as with most of the pre-modern tradition I am exploring here, you have limited the field considerably, as Grace Jantzen, Beverly Lanzetta and other feminist theologians have rightly pointed out.

The first commentator, John of Scythopolis, wanted to preserve some knowing amid the unknowing. Entering the darkness, "Moses in unknowing knew everything. . . . [Dionysius] explains here how God is known through unknowing." Even The Mystical Theology's final list of negations ("not spirit or sonship or fatherhood") is
tempered by John’s paraphrase in that he retains the name of “Trinity.”
“No one knows the pure Trinity as it is . . . We do not know what the subsistence of the pure Trinity is, for we are not of its essence.”
What John of Scythopolis does with specific Dionysian texts is fascinating but fragmentary.

The better expression of turning the Dionysian apophatic to a different end, the third and final outcome for negative theology covered here, is Maximus the Confessor. As hinted in the Scholia, Maximus interpreted Dionysius directly in his other works. To approach God “entirely above essence and entirely above thought,” Moses enters the darkness of unknowing, “beyond the whole nature of the intelligible and the sensible realities.”

But then what? Here is the decisive theological, or rather Christological, move in applying the apophatic impulse. Yes, “no one has ever seen God,” as St. John says, but what then? Maximus makes his move, a decisive move, and it is not Dionysian.

The knowledge of [God the Word] himself in his essence and personhood remains inaccessible to all angels and men alike and he can in no way be known by anyone. But St. John, initiated as perfectly as humanly possible into the meaning of the Word’s incarnation, claims that he has seen the glory of the Word as flesh, that is, he saw the reason or the plan for which God became man, full of grace and truth. For it was not as God by essence, consubstantial to God the Father, that the only-begotten Son gave this grace, but as having in the incarnation became man by nature, and consubstantial to us, that he bestows grace on us who have need of it.

In St. John’s terms, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1.18). Negations thus lead to Christ incarnate.

Here the apophatic serves the incarnational, as in fact St. Paul’s sermon in Athens started with the Unknown God and ended with the one raised from the dead. For Maximus, the apophatic recognition of God’s transcendence does not lead to endless progress as in Gregory or directly to union with the unknown God as in Dionysius but rather to Christ as the incarnate revelation of God. The first outcome invoked endless time, the second featured ecstatic eternity, this third emphasizes salvation history. Of course Gregory and Dionysius had their own Christologies, as various texts show, but their apophatic
moves went in other directions, with other outcomes. Maximus is not
critiquing Dionysius, the apostolic Father, but his text supplements
the Areopagite’s with this linkage from negative theology directly to
the incarnation. To put it flatly, because we cannot know God as
transcendent, we look instead to God as incarnate. Dionysius never
made that connection explicit. His negative theology never turns
Christological in The Mystical Theology or The Divine Names, and his
comments on Christ, the incarnation, or the cross in The Ecclesiastical
Hierarchy never turn apophatic. There is one hint of the connection
in Letter Three: “the transcendent has put aside its own hiddenness
and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being,” yet
remaining hidden, but it is never developed in Dionysius. It was
Maximus who developed this linkage, for the apophatic about God’s
(immanent) transcendence turns to the kataphatic about God’s
(economic) incarnation. Where do negations lead? When Gregory
featured “epektasis” or endless progress, and Dionysius emphasized
“apophasis” or absolute negation, Maximus repeatedly turns to
“kenosis,” that the divine Word emptied himself, into human likeness
to the point of death, even death on a cross, as St. Paul says.

This use of negative theology has many expressions; in the East,
we would encounter the distinction between essence and energies
or activities. In the Western Latin tradition we here follow the
move from a broad application about the incarnation and human
life in general to a specific focus on the mortality and death of
Christ in particular. Bonaventure, for example, in the thirteenth
century follows the Pauline kenosis from the divine down to the
“human form” all the way to the “point of death,” and does so with
an explicit move from the Dionysian apophatic to a Franciscan
focus on Christ crucified. At the culmination of his classic work,
The Soul’s Journey into God, Bonaventure turns apophatic in his
own way. Passing over into God in ecstatic contemplation, as
Francis did, means that “all intellectual activities must be left behind
and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and
transformed into God.” Here Bonaventure has integrated love
into unknowing, following the Victorine line as I am pursuing
elsewhere. Yet there is more. He explicitly quotes The Mystical
Theology by Dionysius, at some length, regarding the “ecstasy of a
pure mind leaving behind all things and freed from all things, you will ascend to the superessential ray of divine darkness." Then the Franciscan makes the Christological move, from Moses and darkness to Christ, not merely to the incarnation of Christ but all the way to the cross. If you seek the Dionysian "superessential ray of the divine darkness," he suggests, you are entering the silent darkness of death with Christ crucified.

Whoever loves this death can see God because it is true beyond doubt that "man shall not see me and live" (Exod. 33.20). Let us, then, die and enter the darkness; let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires and our imaginings. With Christ crucified let us pass "out of this world to the Father" (John 13.1).

The ending of Bonaventure’s "Itinerary" is allusive and poetic and profoundly moving, far beyond these confines regarding negative theology. Nevertheless, with Maximus, Bonaventure turns the Dionysian apophatic to a Christological proclamation. Beyond the Confessor's focus on the incarnation, the Seraphic Doctor stressed the culmination of the incarnation in the cross, following the Pauline kenosis to the end.

This specific outcome of negative theology, turning the apophatic to the crucified, is also represented by Martin Luther, and helps put his critique of Dionysius into the context of a prior tradition, before the usual legacy of John Tauler. Like Maximus and Bonaventure, Luther knew well the negative theology of the Dionysian corpus. Unlike them, however, he did not revere this author as the Areopagite of Acts 17 and in fact quite openly ridiculed this Dionysius, "whoever he was," for his "hodge-podge" about angels, his idle liturgical allegories, and especially his dangerous teachings in *The Mystical Theology*.

So far, indeed, from learning Christ in them [the Dionysian works], you will lose even what you already know of him. I speak from experience. Let us rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2.2).

Beyond this well-known critique in *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther elsewhere speaks explicitly about "negative theology," and how it should turn us to the incarnation and the cross. Early and late in his career he differs with Dionysius about Sinai's cloud or darkness of unknowing. From the very early *Dictata* on the Psalms:
Therefore [b.] Dionysius teaches that one must enter into anagogical darkness and ascend by way of denials. For thus God is hidden and beyond understanding. [Alternatively], this can be understood as referring to the mystery of the Incarnation. For He is concealed in humanity, which is His darkness. Here He could not be seen but only heard.⁴⁹

Here, early in his career, Luther makes the same point that Maximus made, turning from the darkness of the absolute God to the mystery of the incarnation in humanity.⁵⁰ Later, Luther went still further, not only in his bold critique of Dionysius but also in following the kenosis of an incarnational negative theology all the way to the cross, as with Bonaventure.

Therefore Dionysius, who wrote about “negative theology” and “affirmative theology,” deserves to be ridiculed. [In the latter part of his work] he defines “affirmative theology” as “God is being.” “Negative theology” he defines as “God is nonbeing.” But, if we wish to give a true definition of “negative theology,” we should say that it is the holy cross and the afflictions [attending it].⁵¹

Here, of course, we are approaching too large a topic, Luther’s overall “theology of the cross”;⁵² the only brief point at hand is how Luther explicitly turned from a Dionysian apophatic to a “negative theology” of the cross. The “mystical theologians,” he writes elsewhere, may call going into the darkness “ascending beyond being and non-being,” preferring to omit all pictures of Christ’s suffering; but, he says rather emphatically, “The CROSS alone is our theology.”⁵³

When Luther said, “Let us rather hear Paul,” he meant St. Paul’s foolishness of the cross, that God is not so much “unknown” as “hidden” in Christ. That Dionysius had applied 1 Corinthians instead to a general statement about negations was already a concern to the Areopagite’s first commentator, back in the sixth century. John of Scythopolis there wrote, “Note how the father understood the saying of the apostle, for Chrysostom and the other fathers understood it to apply to the cross.”⁵⁴ John does not suggest that Dionysius neglects the cross in general, but points out that the Areopagite did not here move from foolishness/wisdom to Christ crucified. Thus, with “other fathers” who turned negative theology to the cross, we should consider Luther to continue the Pauline
concerns of John the Scholiast, Maximus the Confessor, and Bonaventure the Franciscan in this third use of the apophatic.

Yet Luther goes further still, and uncomfortably so, for apophatic theologians. “Negative theology” does not lead neatly to the cross, it is actually opposed to the cross. Insofar as any negative theology seeks to manage God, it glorifies the self and is thus condemned by the cross. Negative theology can be all about our self-analysis, our recognition of the infinite, our epistemology, what we can and cannot know, but the cross is about God’s kenosis, the infinite in the finite, the divine soteriology, what God has done and will yet do. Further, for Luther, this Christological turn is not simply a safe approach to God through the crucified, some successful albeit indirect access to the transcendent God after all. God preached is hidden and revealed in Christ; but the God not preached remains hidden, beyond our theological strategies. Discourse about negative theology and the cross is not the point; a theoretical theology of the cross is futile, for Luther. What counts is when the Word of the cross kills and makes alive again. The bad news for negative theology is that the incarnate one died because we tortured and killed him, insists Luther, we who are not God and who are indeed opposed to God. “You betrayed and murdered him,” said Stephen (Acts 7). Luther’s negative theology of the cross turns to the condemnation of the law, first of all, the active proclamation of judgment unto repentance, and then to the gospel. When God’s Word of and on the cross destroys our theologies, apophatic and otherwise, then true faith in God is born.

Summary

To be simplistically kataphatic about it, there are at least these three outcomes for negative theology from the pre-modern tradition. First, a perpetual or “progressive apophatic” keying off Exodus 33, with Moses ever advancing morally and spiritually by following God in everlasting time. Negations lead to more negations. Second, a “complete apophatic,” understanding Sinai’s darkness of unknowing in Exodus 19 and 20 as mystical union with God in ecstatic eternity. Negations lead to union with God. Third, an “incarnational
apophatic," explicitly turning from such darkness, following John 1 and Philippians 2, to the incarnation and cross of Christ, in salvation history. Negations about God as transcendent lead to faith in God incarnate and crucified. Gregory of Nyssa taught "epektasis," followed by William of St. Thierry and many others; Dionysius taught an "apophasis" of union, followed by Meister Eckhart and very few others; Maximus the Confessor taught the Pauline "kenosis" taken further by Bonaventure to the death of Christ and still further by Martin Luther. There may have been other types or better examples; there are surely different apophatic moves possible today.

What moderns and post-moderns make of all this, I leave to others, with just these suggestions. Emmanuel Levinas and others echo the progress of Moses following God. Jacques Derrida wanted a complete apophatic, but was right, I think, to distance himself from Dionysius and Eckhart for their linkage of the apophatic to the (biblical) kataphatic and to the (liturgical) community of faith. In modern theology, the classical orthodox tradition of Maximus, apart from the Latin Bonaventure and the Protestant Luther, has been represented ably, even beautifully, by Hans Urs von Balthasar.57


NOTES

1. With my thanks to Harvard Divinity School for the invitation and hospitality surrounding the Dudleian lecture on April 17, 2008. I am most grateful to Sarah Coakley for her specific critique, as partially reflected in this revised text.


3. But see Denys Turner, "Apophasicism, idolatry and the claims of reason," in _Silence and the Word_, ed. O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11–34, for links from some of these same pre-modern authors to various post-modern discussions.


5. _Life of Moses_ II, 230; p. 114.

7. Life of Moses II, 239; p. 116
8. Life of Moses II, 251; p. 119.
9. Life of Moses II, 252; p. 119.
10. Life of Moses II, 231; p. 114.
19. The Divine Names 1 589B, p. 50f.
20. Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 53-57 and 194-205, with other studies mentioned there. To be abbreviated as Commentary.
21. The Mystical Theology 1, 1001A, p. 137.
22. The Divine Names 13, 981B, p. 130.
28. Essential Eckhart, p. 206f. “Si comprehendis, non est Deus.” Augustine’s Sermon 117.3.5 (PL 38: 663.) Rather like Groucho Marx not wanting to be part of any club that would have him for a member!
29. Eckhart, Teacher, p. 117.

34. For Eckhart and Dionysius, see B. McGinn, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart (New York: Crossroads, 2001), p. 177f


36. PG 4.429; of uncertain authorship, not by John of Scythopolis, perhaps by Maximus.


38. PG 4.421AB. See Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus (Oxford Clarendon, 1998), p. 244 (To be abbreviated as John of Scythopolis.)


41. Maximus, Chapters on Knowledge, II, 76, p. 164; Andrew Louth, Maximus the Confessor (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 52–54


43. Ep. 3 1069B, p. 264. I owe this qualification to the helpful critique of Charles Stang, whose Harvard dissertation develops a Dionysian apophatic anthropology in another way.


45. Soul’s Journey 7.5; p. 115.

46. Soul’s Journey 7.6; p. 116


48. Luther’s Works 36: 109; WA 6: 562. 8–13

49. LW 10: 119–120; WA 3. 124.32–35

50. See also Luther’s comment that “inexperienced monks rise into heaven with their speculations and think about God as He is in himself From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish . . .” LW 12:312; WA 40/2: 329.


52. See now Vítor Westhelle, The Scandalous God the Use and Abuse of the Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). In the fourth (1954) edition of his classic Luther’s theologia

53. WA 5: 176. 27–33. Cf. WA 56: 299. 27 to 300. 3; LW 25: 287.


57. Besides his direct expositions of Maximus, such as The Cosmic Liturgy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), see the eloquent little “elucidation” on “The Unknown God,” Elucidations tr. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), pp. 18–25.