Apophaticism in Contemporary Philosophy

Sotiris Mitralexis

Abstract

This chapter focuses on apophaticism in contemporary postmodern philosophy — yet, not on the contemporary philosophical reception of apophaticism in general, but on thinkers that develop apophatic impulses into wider schemata that go beyond God and lay claim to core areas of philosophy. It explores contemporary philosophical receptions of (patristic) apophaticism that articulate it as something considerably more wide-encompassing than a mere method, a language, a stance, or a *via negativa* for describing the Godhead. The chapter focuses on two examples and 'case studies' from the Christian West and the Christian East respectively, academic philosophers Jean-Luc Marion and Christos Yannaras, who both elevate apophaticism into a core element of their respective philosophies. It could be said that Marion formulates an apophaticism that constitutes a (non-ontotheological) phenomenological ontology, while Yannaras argues for an apophatic philosophical epistemology. In both these undertakings, an apophaticism that is presented as not being *different* to that of the patristic era is nevertheless 'updated', brought into dialogue with modern and contemporary philosophy, and brought forth in order to address (some of) the problems of philosophy.

Keywords: Christos Yannaras, Jean-Luc Marion, apophaticism, ontology, epistemology, ontotheology, phenomenology

Short bio: Dr Sotiris Mitralexis is Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Winchester.

Longer bio: Dr Sotiris Mitralexis is Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Winchester and holds a doctorate in philosophy from the Freie Universität Berlin, a doctorate in political science and international relations from the University of the Peloponnese, and a doctorate in theology from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has been Seeger Fellow at Princeton University, Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge, Visiting Senior Research Associate at Peterhouse, Cambridge, Visiting Fellow at the University of Erfurt, Teaching Fellow at the University of Athens and Bogazici University, as well as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Istanbul Sehir University. His publications include *Ever-Moving Repose* (Cascade, 2017), *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher* (co-ed., Cascade, 2017), *Polis, Ontology, Ecclesial Event* (ed., James Clarke & Co, 2018), *Between Being and Time* (ed., Fortress, 2019) and *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity* (co-ed., Routledge, 2019), as well as the forthcoming monograph *Subversive Orthodoxies: Philosophy of Religion and Political Theology in Contemporary Greece*.

Apophaticism is usually defined as the *via negativa*, 'negative theology', a method of describing God by negation, of obtaining knowledge of God through negating concepts, and/or of stressing the ineffability of the divine. It is usually thought to be in the domain of mystical tradition. The question of whether such a conceptualisation of apophaticism is accurate is beyond the scope of this chapter — although it has to be stated that, for example in Maximus the Confessor's writings and in a number of other patristic authors, apophatic descriptions emerge as *anything but* subjective, mystical experiences (and, admittedly, 'anything but' is an apt phrase in defining apophaticism); quite the contrary, they emerge as a theologically and philosophically *technical* and robust language that forms a precondition in order to qualify any cataphatic description, not only of God but of everything.

Much has been written on apophaticism and postmodernism (e.g., focusing on Jean-Luc Nancy: Franke 2007), often in a critical vein that reduces apophaticism to nothing more than a narrowly-understood *via negativa* (e.g., Bulzan 1997), and is has been noted that 'many of these discussions have drawn inspiration from the work of Jacques Derrida, who himself, while genuinely intrigued by Christian apophaticism, has not been without critical reserve' (Laird 2001: 1). In this chapter, I will focus on apophaticism in contemporary postmodern philosophy — yet, not on the contemporary philosophical reception of apophaticism *in general*, or the 'current apophatic rage', as it has been described (Laird 2001: 1), but on thinkers that develop apophatic impulses into wider *schemata* that go beyond God and lay claim to core areas of philosophy. Instead of attempting an exhaustive survey of such thinkers, I will take two academic philosophers with a keen interest in —and important contributions to— theology as case studies: Jean-Luc Marion and Christos Yannaras. It just so happens that one of them is Roman Catholic, while the other Eastern Orthodox. Both of them elevate apophaticism into something considerably more wide-encompassing than a mere method, a language, a stance, or a *via negativa* for describing the Godhead; both of them elevate apophaticism into a core element of their respective philosophies, something which has not eluded the attention of scholars authoring monographs on them (in the case of Jean-Luc Marion, see for example Jones 2011, originally stemming from Jones 2008; in Christos Yannaras' case, see Petrá 2019, translated from Petrá 2015). I would like to propose that Yannaras proposes apophaticism as a philosophical *epistemology* of its own, while Marion as a (non-ontotheological) phenomenological *ontology* — although this distinction is made here for the sheer convenience of the present discussion, as for both Marion and Yannaras apophaticism is *both* (the precondition of) an ontology *and* (the prerequisite for) an epistemology (not to mention the

delicate balance between phenomenology and ontology or the negation of the latter by the former, a topic well beyond the scope of this chapter). While they have developed their thinking independently of each other and while their philosophies have many crucial differences between them, it is interesting to note that both in Marion's 1991 *God without Being* and Yannaras' 1967 *Heidegger and the Areopagite* a certain common impulse is clearly discernible in their employment of apophatic thinking: they both seek to respond to the challenges raised by Nietzsche's 'death of God' and its aftermath via an engagement with Martin Heidegger's philosophy and a re-examination of patristic authors such as Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, and others.

This brief presentation assumes no prior, 'internal' knowledge of Marion's and Yannaras' work and revolves around key texts. To the extent that this is possible, Marion's and Yannaras' apophaticism(s) will be presented in their own words.

JEAN-LUC MARION:

APOPHATICISM AS A (NON-ONTOTHEOLOGICAL) PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

In my brief introduction to Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical apophaticism I shall focus on his *God without Being* (Marion 2012). In *God without Being,* Jean-Luc Marion does not explicitly describe his exposition as an apophatic one — in fact, the word 'apophasis' appears only once in the text (while 'apophaticism' does not appear at all), and this in a chapter that was appended to the text in its 2012 edition — originally stemming from a 1994 lecture and a 1995 paper published in the *Revue Thomiste*, 'Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie' (Marion 2012: 234). Marion does explicitly mention apophasis and apophaticism in studies such as 'What Cannot Be Said: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love' (Marion 2008). There, he hastens to distinguish apophaticism proper from what is perceived as a mystical, subjective negative theology that is essentially inaccessible to philosophy, and criticizes the reception of apophaticism by postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (Marion 2008: 102–3).

However, and apart from writings such as this, it is precisely with the publication of *God without Being* that 'Jean-Luc Marion consolidates his position as one of the most significant Christian apophaticists of postmodernity' (Laird 2001: 6) — in spite of the fact that his earlier *The Idol and Distance* also engages in the question of apophaticism vis-à-vis, primarily, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (Marion 2001). Johannes Zachhuber notes that 'it is Marion's early study of Ps.-Dionysius [i.e., in *The Idol and Distance*] that must serve as the starting point of any serious assessment of his appropriation of negative theology' (Zachhuber forthcoming: 4), yet in presenting how Marion develops what is, unmistakably, apophaticism into a prerequisite for ontology —rather than how Marion engages with the great apophatic thinkers of the patristic era— I will here rely on *God without Being.*

In *God without Being*, Marion takes God as the starting point of his inquiry. I mentioned in the beginning that, in this chapter, I am examining thinkers that do not exhaust apophaticism as a discourse concerning God, i.e. concerning what *can* and what *cannot* be said of God, and counterintuitively this is fully in line with Marion's analysis of 'God without Being'. This is the case since Marion's God, implicitly yet decisively and in spite of resisting every ontotheological configuration, *continues to be the ontological grounding of (created) existence* — if not for any other reason, then precisely because the world, creation, everything (and G⊗d is not part of every-*thing*) is not *causa sui*. The fact that the world itself is to be seen as a gift entails that the question concerning the one who freely and out of love grants this gift is indeed the *prerequisite* for any ontology concerning the world. Thus, Marion's examination of G⊗d, or 'God without Being', is unavoidably the prerequisite for Marion's ontology. We see here apophaticism being deployed as a 'first philosophy', an ontology.

Marion seeks to ground a non-ontotheological *theo*logy not simply by reiterating that the God of Christian tradition is neither 'one of the beings' nor 'the highest being', nor in clarifying that 'among the divine names, none exhausts G⊗d or offers the grasp or hold of a comprehension of him; the divine names have strictly no other function than to manifest this impossibility' (Marion 2012: 106) , but by delving deeper, and radically differentiating God (or rather, as he formulates the non-ontotheological God in orthography, G⊗d) both from 'beings' *and* from the Heideggerian 'Being' — which, in turn, is *not* one of the beings, and is certainly *not* God: 'Beingness thus transforms the question of Being as well into a question of the *ens supremum*, itself understood and posited starting from the requirement, decisive for being, of the foundation' (Marion 2012: 34). And further, 'ontological difference, *almost* indispensable to all thought, presents itself as a *negative* propaedeutic of the unthinkable

thought of God. It is the ultimate idol' (Marion 2012: 45–46). In seeking to define ontotheology, Marion lays out the following:

> Since one must understand the question correctly before answering it, it is necessary to define (or redefine) onto-theo-logy. Heidegger, in his lecture titled *The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics*, given and published in 1957, elaborates on such a definition: 'The onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that Difference, which keeps Being as the ground [*Sein als Grund*] and entity as grounded [*Seiendes als gegründet*] and what gives grounds as a cause [*begrundendes*] apart from and related to each other; and by this keeping, perdurance [*Austrag*] is achieved'. This determination indicates, then, a double intersecting foundation. (1) Being—inasmuch as it differs definitely from every entity—is proclaimed not an entity, thus as having nothing of entity and especially nothing of that particular entity called God. On the contrary, insofar as it is a negation of entity, it is able to ground each and every entity, including that named 'God', because it makes them both thinkable (according to entity, indeed to a concept of entity) and possible (conceivable as noncontradictory in a concept). (2) Reciprocally, entity, in particular the first entity proclaimed in each metaphysics, not only grounds the other beings in the name of the first cause that gives an account as well but also grounds the being of an entity by bringing it to perfection and even by bringing into existence the formal characteristics of entitativeness (Marion 2012: 202–3; Heidegger quotes derive from Heidegger 1957: 63).

Marion begins by seeking to demonstrate that *any* discourse that reifies God by necessity replaces God with a conceptual *idol*:

> When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names 'God', this concept functions exactly as an idol. It gives itself to be seen, but thus all the better conceals itself as the mirror where thought, invisibly, has its forward point fixed, so that the *invisable* finds itself, with an aim suspended by the fixed concept, disqualified and abandoned; thought freezes, and the idolatrous concept of 'God' appears, where, more than God, thought judges itself. The conceptual idols of metaphysics culminate in the *causa sui* (as Heidegger indicates) only insofar as the figures of onto-theo-logy have all undertaken to consign to a concept the ultimate low-water mark of their advance toward the divine (Plato, Aristotle), and after that toward the Christian God: thus the conceptual idol of the '*moralischer Gott*, the God of "morality' (Heidegger) limits the horizon of the grasp of God by Kant —"the presupposition of a moral author of the world'— just as it does that of the 'death of God', since, by the very admission of Nietzsche himself, 'Im Grunde ist ja nur der moralische Gott überwunden, At bottom it is only the moral God that has been overcome'. In both cases, in that of theism as in that of so-called 'atheism', the measure of the concept comes not from God but from the aim of the gaze (Marion 2012: 16).

Apart from what could be described as an odious misconception, however, the *ontological* (and ontotheological) problem in articulating the question 'does God exist?' (or, symmetrically, to the affirmation that 'God does exist!', 'God is' — an idolatrous affirmation,

in this context) is that the primacy in the very logical syntax of this question belongs to 'exist' rather than to 'God'. 'God exists' to the extent that God is, as it were, successfully subjected to the criteria that 'existing' sets forth — criteria that emerge from our world of beings and Being itself. 'Being says nothing about God that God cannot immediately reject. Being, even and especially in Exod. 3:14, says nothing about God, or says nothing determining about him' (Marion 2012: 45). Marion wonders: '*Whence comes the decision that G⊗d should have to be*, like a being that Being manifests, that is manifested according to Being?'(Marion 2012: 70); 'Does the name of the G⊗d, who is crossed because he is crucified, belong to the domain of Being?' (Marion 2012: 71). A God that *is*, a God that *exists*, is thus certainly *not* the God of the Christian church:

> To the thought that is attached to thinking Being as Being, outside of metaphysics, in the definite confrontation with ontological difference meditated as such, the question of 'the existence of God' inevitably will appear misplaced, hasty and imprecise. Imprecise, for what does it mean *to exist*, and is this term suitable to something like 'God'? […] What is essential in the question of 'the existence of God' stems less from 'God' than from existence itself, therefore from Being. Thus, in the end, this question appears misplaced — at once unsuitable and dislodged from its proper site: the truth on 'God' could never come but from where truth itself issues, namely from Being as such, from its constellation and from its opening (Marion 2012: 41).

It is crucial to reiterate here that Marion's thought is not merely 'apophatic' in the first-level type of the *via negativa*, of insisting on what *cannot* be said of God and on the 'negative' yet conceptual formulations that emerge, as for example 'un-thinkable'. Echoing a certain patristic insistence in avoiding to literally ascribe to God any trait that has its opposite (and, thus, all narrowly-defined 'apophatic' non-descriptions as well), as pairs of opposites characterise the *created* order, Marion demonstrates that even characterising God as 'unthinkable' indirectly turns God into a cataphatic idol and is not enough, as declaring God 'unthinkable' simply renders God a *thinkable* object of our thought under the label of 'unthinkable': 'Concerning God, let us admit clearly that we can think him only under the figure of the unthinkable, but of an unthinkable that exceeds as much what we cannot think as what we can; for that which I may not think is still the concern of *my* thought, and hence to *me* remains thinkable' (Marion 2012: 46). Thus, 'the unthinkable determines God by the seal of his definitive indeterminateness for a created and finite thought' (Marion 2012: 46) — the debate is not settled simply by declaring God to be 'unthinkable'. A more radical gesture is required:

> The unthinkable forces us to substitute the idolatrous quotation marks around 'God' with the very God that no mark of knowledge can demarcate; and, in order to say it, let us cross out G⊗d, with a

cross, provisionally of St. Andrew; which demonstrates the limit of the temptation, conscious or naive, to blaspheme the unthinkable in an idol. The cross does not indicate that G⊗d would have to disappear as a concept, or intervene only in the capacity of a hypothesis in the process of validation, but that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought. To cross out G⊗d, in fact, indicates and recalls that G⊗d crosses out our thought because he saturates it; better, he enters into our thought only in obliging it to criticize itself. The crossing out of G⊗d we trace on his written name only because, first, He brings it to bear on our thought, as his unthinkableness. We cross out the name of G⊗d only in order to show ourselves that his unthinkableness saturates our thought-right from the beginning, and forever (Marion 2012: 46).

However, Marion is not content with demonstrating what *cannot* be said of God — as for example when he concludes 'that G⊗d is expressed neither as a being nor as Being, nor by an essence' (Marion 2012: 106). He traces in the Gospel of John's 'definition' of God as love, as ἀγάπη (1 John 4:8), a way out of conceptual idolatry — as Marion traces in love, and in the function of freely *giving*, of the *gift,* a mode of existence that cannot be constrained by any set prerequisites for 'existing' or 'being', terms that would otherwise acquire primacy over the love that God *is.* 'In the distance, only ἀγάπη can put every thing on earth, in heaven, and in hell, in giving, because ἀγάπη alone, by definition, is not known, is not — but gives (itself)' (Marion 2012: 106); 'What allows that 'God' should be G⊗d consists, more radically than in being, in loving' (Marion 2012: 74):

> To think G⊗d, therefore, outside of ontological difference, outside the question of Being, as well, risks the unthinkable, indispensable, but impassable. What name, what concept, and what sign nevertheless yet remain feasible? A single one, no doubt, love, or as we would like to say, as Saint John proposes — 'God [is] ἀγάπη' (1 John 4:8). Why love? Because this term, which Heidegger (like, moreover, all of metaphysics, although in a different way) maintains in a derived and secondary state, still remains, paradoxically, unthought enough to free, some day at least, the thought of G⊗d from the second idolatry. This task, immense and, in a sense, still untouched, requires working love conceptually (and hence, in return, working the concept through love), to the point that its full speculative power can be deployed. […] If, on the contrary, God is not because he does not have to be, but loves, then, by definition, no condition can continue to restrict his initiative, amplitude, and ecstasy. Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; he thus loves without limit or restriction (Marion 2012: 47).

Much of *God without Being* is dedicated to showing how this love discloses a G⊗d that is beyond 'existing', 'being', and the Heideggerian 'Being', and how this love renders G⊗d participable, 'for, in order to accomplish the response to love, it is necessary and sufficient to will it, since will alone can refuse or receive so that man cannot impose any condition, even

negative, on the initiative of G⊗d. Thus no aim can any longer decide idolatrously on the possibility or impossibility of access to and from "God"' (Marion 2012: 48). This G⊗d who reveals himself 'has nothing in common (at least in principle, and provided that he not condescend to it) with the 'God' of the philosophers, of the learned, and, eventually, of the poet' (Marion 2012: 52).

Should all this seem *too* modern (or *post*-modern) to the reader, it would be helpful to recall that a number of Church Fathers —irrespective of Marion's *reading* of them— offered the basis for surprisingly similar apophaticisms (if this plural form may be excused). To cite but the example of just one such patristic author, Maximus the Confessor speaks in the 7th century of God 'according to the measure of our language, for it is not possible for us to transcend it;' ('τῷ μέτρῳ τῆς ἡμετέρας γλώσσης ἀκολουθῶν, (οὐ γὰρ ὑπερβῆναι ταύτην δυνατὸν ἡμῖν)'; *Scholia in De Divinis Nominibus*, CD4.1 189B). For Maximus, God is explicitly beyond everything that we call 'being' and 'existence', even leading up to descriptions such as the following ones: '[…] because of his being beyond being, [God] is more fittingly referred to as nonbeing' ('καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸ μὴ εἶναι μᾶλλον, διὰ τὸ ὑπερεῖναι, ὡς οἰκειότερον ἐπ' αὐτοῦ λεγόμενον προσιέμενος'; *Myst.*, proem.109), and 'nonbeing is properly meant with regard to [God], since he is not among beings' ('κυρίως γὰρ ἐπ' αὐτοῦ λέγεται τὸ μὴ ὄν, ἐπειδὴ οὐδέν ἐστι τῶν ὄντων'; *Q.Dub.*, 2.14.4–6). As a matter of fact, and in spite of the obvious absence of an explicit Heideggerian ontological difference between beings and Being (and, together with Marion —and Heidegger himself— I am *not* equating here the Heideggerian Being with the uncreated God), Maximus clarifies that words like 'being' [ὄν and εἶναι] cannot apply both to creation and to the uncreated God: 'for since it is necessary that we understand correctly the difference between God and creatures, then the affirmation of being beyond being [ὑπερεῖναι, ὑπερούσιος] must be the negation of beings and the affirmation of beings must be the negation of being beyond being. In fact both names, being and nonbeing, are to be reverently applied to [God] although not at all properly' (*Myst.*, proem.110–115). Maximus later adds that God transcends 'all affirmation and negation': 'For nothing whatsoever, whether being or nonbeing, is linked to him as a cause, no being or what is called being, no nonbeing, or what is called nonbeing, is properly close to him. He has in fact a simple existence, unknowable and inaccessible to all and altogether beyond understanding which transcends all affirmation and negation' (*Myst.*, proem.120-125; cf. *Amb.Io.* 17: 1128B, 1129C; further elaboration in Mitralexis 2017: 45–48).

In examining patristic texts such as these, one is led to the conclusion that Marion is following a certain patristic tradition of thought and working in re-articulating it in contemporary philosophical terms rather than departing from a tradition and formulating a new one, according to which God is 'without being' or 'without Being'. Interestingly, however, Marion mentions that *God without Being* has been initially received with scepticism, if not outrage, by theologians, who did not perceive it as continuing the Christian tradition of thought they ascribed to: 'curiously, its theses were better received by the philosophers and academics than by the theologians and believers' (Marion 2012, xxvi–xxvii). In any case, in building its argument the book draws heavily on patristic texts such as the *Corpus Dionysiacum.* For example, Marion reminds the reader that

> Denys posits that G⊗d, namely, that which can be aimed at only by the function (and not the category) of the 'Requisite (αἰτία) of all things', is deployed as the 'principle of beings whence issues, as well as all beings whatsoever, Being itself, ἀρχὴ ἀγάπης καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι'. G⊗d gives Being to beings only because he precedes not only these beings, but also the gift that he delivers to them — to be. In this way the precedence of Being over beings itself refers to the precedence of the gift over Being, hence finally of the one who delivers the gift over Being (Marion 2012: 75). […] Denys insists without reservation on this decisive point, in clearly judging the audacity of his thesis: 'And if the good surpasses all beings ... one must say also, if one might dare, that non-being itself also, καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ μὴ ὄν, tends towards the good beyond all beings'; and further on: 'The discourse must dare even to say that non-being also, καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν, participates in the beautiful and the good [namely, καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν]', 'or, to be brief, all beings come from the [77] beautiful and the good, and all non-beings reside beyond every essence in the beautiful and the good' (Marion 2012: 76–77); as Dionysian sources, Marion cites in endnote 58, respectively, *Divine Names* IV.3.697a, then IV.7.704b, and finally IV.10.705d-708a.)

Space does not allow for a fuller exposition of Marion's argument here (for a book-length treatment of 'Marion's apophatic phenomenology', the reader is directed to Jones 2011). What needs to be reiterated, however, that apart from this argument being a *theo*-logy, it is indeed an *ontology* — in spite of the irony that patristic sources, full of ontological claims, are retrieved by Marion in order 'to surpass and "overcome" metaphysics and ontology', as noted by (Jones 2011: 11–12). And it is an ontology since, as remarked in the beginning of this section, Marion's G⊗d *continues to be the ontological grounding of (created) existence,* as the world, creation, everything (and G⊗d is not part of every-*thing*) is not *causa sui*. Marion is much more concerned with the implications of his non-ontotheological *theo*-logy for us and the world, i.e. with the ontology that stems from the disclosure of being as a *gift* and from the cause of this gift as *love* rather than as a being or Being, than with elaborating on the non-being

of a G⊗d without Being. Thus, Marion's apophaticism is truly the cornerstone of his ontology of the world, of our world, the world of Being and beings (on the balance between phenomenology and ontology in Marion, see Jones 2011: 79–108).

CHRISTOS YANNARAS:

APOPHATICISM AS A COMPREHENSIVE EPISTEMOLOGY

To the (growing) extent that Christos Yannaras is known in the Anglosphere, he is known as an (Eastern Orthodox) theologian — however, his career was in academic philosophy, and his denser volumes such as *Person and Eros* (Yannaras 1982; 2007) or *The Effable and the Ineffable* (Yannaras 1999; 2021) deal with philosophical problems across the spectrum of ontology/metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and social philosophy — although many of his monographs remain untranslated in English. The theological 'impulse' behind a mainly philosophical itinerary is one of the many points of convergence between Yannaras and Marion, although there are no indications that either philosopher has studied the work of the other and engaged with it. As with Marion, Heidegger is one among Yannaras' major starting points, as is evident from his earliest works onwards; 'Yannaras as a young man studied a few years in Germany where he acquainted himself with Heidegger's writings. […] It is clear that his familiarity extended beyond *Being and Time* and included some of Heidegger's work after the "Kehre," especially his writings on Nietzsche and "European nihilism"'(Dallmayr 2019: 4). (Yannaras' perhaps idiosyncratic reception of Wittgenstein forms another major starting point for his thought.) Yannaras does not primarily engage with apophaticism as a discourse and method for describing the ineffable God — although this was his starting point in his first monograph in 1967 on 'Heidegger and the Areopagite' (republished as Yannaras 1972; translated into English in 2005). In an axis permeating the totality of his *oeuvre* and in an admittedly sweeping gesture, Yannaras presents the apophaticism he traces in Greek tradition, classical and Christian alike up until at least the 14th century and Gregory Palamas' writings (Dallmayr 2019: 7), as an all-encompassing epistemological *stance*, a criterion of knowledge consisting in the refusal to exhaust truth in its formulation and to identify the understanding of the signifier with the knowledge of its signified reality and, importantly, the communal verification of knowledge. This apophatic epistemology is a *relational* and *communal* one, since according to Yannaras knowledge arises from experience, experience arises from

relation, and every relation constitutes an experience (Yannaras 2011b: 58). Some necessary context here is that for Yannaras human beings are, emphatically, relational beings; they are not to be defined as separated and self-sufficient individuals, but as *persons* in the etymological sense of πρόσωπα, with πρὸς ('towards, with direction to') and ὦψ/gen. ὠπὸς ('eye, face, countenance') defining them as beings whose face looks at, or rather is directed towards, someone or something — with πρόσωπον and ὑπόστασις being, of course, the standard terms for the persons of the Trinity in Greek patristics, now interpreted as denoting radical relationality and communion (Yannaras 1970; a reading later popularised in Europe and beyond by Zizioulas 1985). It is important to clarify that according to Yannaras, this apophaticism is an overall *stance* and *attitude* towards epistemology, towards the question of the nature of knowledge and truth, rather than a *theory* on epistemology — and as such, explicit formulations concerning this apophatic stance *as an epistemology* can only be found in fragmentary form in the corpus of Greek texts and seldom in the form of a pre-modern systematic exposition. As is most often the case with the epistemological attitude of a culture, this attitude is *implicit*, as it is taken for granted in the context of that culture itself and not formulated from a perspective external to it (Mitralexis 2017: 20). Thus, Yannaras sees himself as systematically presenting the implicit yet comprehensive epistemological *stance* of (classical, but even more so Christian and ecclesial) Greek culture, not as an author of a novel theory *per se*. Yet epistemology is integrally intertwined with ontology, since for to Yannaras ontological systems or statements are based on, and presuppose, the epistemology on which they are built: the criteria according to which knowledge is considered to be valid or otherwise (Mitralexis 2017: 22). That is why, he remarks, 'we conclude from history that common epistemology (incorporated in the everyday life of the people) and not common ontology constitute a common culture, i.e., the otherness of common way of life: it is not the content we attribute to truth, but it is the way in which cognitive validity is confirmed that confers otherness in shaping public life, identity of culture, and ensures the historical continuity of that cultural otherness' (Yannaras 2011b: 45) — and this accounts for how there can be a common epistemological *stance* or *tendency* in cultures with diverging ontological foundations, such as the classical one and the Christian *ecclesia*.

The centrality of this enlarged conception of apophaticism for Yannaras' thought emerged very early in his work. Thus, in his 1967 *Heidegger and the Areopagite,* he clarified a distinction between the standard understanding of apophaticism as a theological *via negativa* and his project as a distinction between an *apophaticism of essence* and an *apophaticism of the*

person, a distinction that forms 'an insurmountable contrast on the level of ontology as well as epistemology' (Yannaras 2005: 29): at this stage, God is still the primary context of Yannaras' exposition of apophaticism, yet the main approach according to which apophaticism sees language as *referring to* truth and reality, *signifying* reality and *iconizing* it, while not exhausting it, is already there.

In works after his 1967 *Heidegger and the Areopagite*, apophaticism emerges as considerably more wide-encompassing, fleshed out as a theory. Here, apophaticism is introduced as a theory of knowledge summarised in '(1) the denial that we exhaust knowledge in its formulation; (2) the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifiers with the knowledge of what is signified; and (3) the symbolic character of every epistemic expression: its role in bringing together atomic (i.e. individual) experiences and embracing them within a common semantic boundary marker, a process which allows epistemic experience to be shared and once shared to be verified' (Yannaras 2011a: 2.6). This focus on the inadequacy of formulations to reflect truth, and thus grant knowledge, turns Yannaras' attention to the relation between language and our rational, or rather *log-ical* (as in *logos*-possessing, with Yannaras preferring *logos*' staggering polysemy over *ratio*) capacity to attain knowledge:

> There is a distinct difference between language and reality: language only *signifies* reality. Linguistic signifiers, i.e., words and syntax, are merely conventional markers of reality (Yannaras 2021: 1:2.1). Language is a convention. Yet, conventional language shapes our experiential relationship with reality, defining it with structured concepts. It composes it and articulates it. We cannot conceive, define or signify anything beyond the possibilities granted by our language (1:2.2). We do not owe the possibility of *logos* to language. We do, however, owe to it our constitution as *logical* and thinking subjects. If the understanding of signifiers can descend easily into an illusory knowledge of the signifieds, then confusion over reality and fantasy has its basis in the field of our *logical* constitution (1:2.2.1). What a linguistic signifier signifies is not reality itself but one's subjective relationship with it — a relationship distinct from every other subjective relationship with the same signifieds. A common linguistic signifier coordinates one's subjective relationship with references to the same signified shared by all the subjects who speak the same language (1:2.3). This coordination allows me to test the accuracy of my own subjective referencing, even if the real or illusory nature of my relationship with what is signified is not guaranteed by accurate semantics. The word 'love', for instance, refers speakers of a common language to a shared mental image by which possible semantic misuse of the term can be detected. Yet, the correct usage of a word within the framework of a particular linguistic code does not confirm the reality of my subjective experience of being in love (1:2.3.1).

Every *cataphatic* approach to knowledge, every approach that overlooks the abysmal chasm between the signifier and the reality it signifies, ends up in 'illusory knowledge'. An example would be the following one: we may come up with innumerable definitions of maternal love, and articulate our experience of it in countless ways. These definitions and descriptions are bound to overlap considerably, convincing us that we are indeed speaking of the same kind of experience. However, a child whose mother died at birth and came to know no maternal figure while growing up will not *know* maternal love, will not be able to acquire an actual *knowledge* thereof, however many definitions and descriptions of maternal love she studies and learns by heart (see also Yannaras 1991: 16–17). The knowledge of 'signifiers' does not, and cannot, engender a knowledge of the realities signified by them — yet the importance of this chasm varies by degrees: 'when a linguistic signifier signifies one's subjective relationship with sensible signifieds, then the reality of those signifieds can be immediately verified by one's individual senses', Yannaras notes; 'difficulty with respect to verification arises when a signified is not a sensible object, but a quintessentially subjective relationship in the form of an event, such as love, faith, friendship, obedience, communion, freedom, and so on—or when a signified is intellectually derived from relational events, such as justice, virtue, God or immortality, and so forth. (Yannaras 2021: 1:2.3.2). However, and while language and 'signifiers' cannot *impart* actual knowledge, they do play a crucial aspect in the *social, communal verification* of knowledge, which forms a *sine qua non* for Yannaras' apophatic epistemology, since individual experience does not constitute a guarantee of valid knowledge in the first place. Language's signifiers are found to *reflect* truth when they refer to an experienced reality that is shared in common — and here Yannaras invokes the well-known Heraclitean dictum according to which that which is shared is true, yet that which is possessed privately is false. It is the convergence of individual experiences into shared expressions that provide hints concerning the validity of those expressions and their *mutatis mutandis* accurate depiction of reality, yet this *knowledge* of the expressions can only be *verified* by shared experience, not *imparted* to the individual (Yannaras 2011a: 2.5). Thus, relation and the communal circulation of knowledge provide the basis for the *possibility* of knowledge; Yannaras proposes relation ('the relational event, relational experiences, the epistemic immediacy of relations') as an 'effective alternative to the autonomy of comprehension, to the epistemic self-sufficiency of comprehension', as a 'mode of comprehension is not restricted to the correct intellectual reception and usage of linguistic signifiers, but also confirms the reality or non-reality of their signifieds', as that which makes possible the access to knowledge via signifiers in spite of their inadequacy — as 'the means by which to distinguish the existent

from the non-existent, what is real from intellectual idols' (Yannaras 2021: 3:1–3:2). It is in the *locus* of relation and the theory of knowledge and the theory of being, epistemology and ontology respectively, seem to almost merge in Yannaras' thought, leading him to what he terms a relational ontology and an apophatic communal epistemology:

> Relation is knowledge as immediate experiential assurance, the mode by which we recognize reality. It is the mode by which we participate in the communion of experiential assurance, the mode by which each person can verify knowledge of reality. It is the mode by which what we recognize as existent exists, the mode by which existence is both realized and manifested (Yannaras 2011a: 2.5.3). If relation is a real presupposition of existence and knowledge for humanity (the mode by which we exist and know), then the factors —essential for perception to function— of cause and purpose, space and time, beginning and end, although constituted as experiential givens by relation, are only the horizon of every event of relation, boundary markers or measures of the event of relation. And, as measures or boundary markers, they inevitably have some character of objectivity — that is, they cannot be taken as subjective products of rational referentiality; they have at least the 'objectivity' of language (Yannaras 2011a: 20.3.4).

At the same time, this communion of signifiers corresponding to shared experiences granted by relation, which is recognised by Yannaras as the sole way to *participate* in reality, adds a new layer of shared experience; it engenders culture and meaning. And, in the case of Yannaras, it engenders the *demos* and manifests the *ecclesia*; it constitutes political cohabitation and discloses the community of persons that live in reflection of the Triune relational prototype, who is not first and foremost an impersonal divine essence or substance, a Godhead, but *persons in communion*, recognisable and identifiable in their relational interpenetration: the *Father*— of the Son; the *Son*— of the Father; the *Spirit*— of the Father. Persons that are not *known* propositionally, but by entering a relationship with them. While Yannaras argues that apophaticism implicitly formed the epistemological *stance* of classical Greeks, it is quite obvious that, for him, apophaticism *par excellence* as an approach to knowledge in general (and not an approach to the knowledge *of God* in particular) is tied to the life and experience of the Christian church. While Yannaras never explicitly makes this remark and would not embark on so 'confessional' a formulation in his philosophical writings, it is interesting to read John 14:6 in light of this. 'I am the way and the truth and the life': *the* truth is not something to be *learned* or *informed about* —a formula or formulation, a doctrine, an aggregate of information, an awe-inspiring secret— but truth itself is *a person*, the person (hypostasis) of Jesus Christ, the incarnate *Logos* (and the divine persons, the Father and the Spirit, to be known *through* him), and one comes to *know* this truth by getting to know this person, by entering a relationship with that person. And a relationship with a person (divine or

otherwise) is *dynamic*; one can never exclaim that one has conclusively acquired the fulness of the other person's knowledge. By extension, all knowledge is *dynamic* rather than static, and acquired *dynamically,* by the progression of relation. While Yannaras has never, to my knowledge, explicitly commented on this biblical passage in writing, it is easy to discern the affinities here. Returning to Yannaras' identification of the Christian church as a community of apophatic epistemology (for the knowledge of physical and meta-physical realities alike) and relational ontology, he remarks that

> the language of *ecclesial* experience in the first Christian centuries […] consistently insisted on the epistemological principle of apophaticism: the refusal to equate knowledge merely with comprehension of the form in which it is articulated in language. The language of *ecclesial* metaphysics functions in a purely indicative and referential manner. It refers to a relational experience, to the achievement of relationship — to that knowledge which results from transcending intellectual curiosity and psychological insecurity, the knowledge of faithful trust (Yannaras 2021: 13:3). In the perspective of *ecclesial* apophaticism, experiential access to and relationship with the signifieds of metaphysical semantics cannot be attained purely by individual effort. Access is mediated by participation in the *ecclesial* mode of living—in that kind of *personal* and loving relational communion that forms the 'body' of the Eucharistic community. Only by experiencing *ecclesial* relational communion can one progressively attain some indirect knowledge ('through a mirror, dimly') of what is signified by words like '*person*', '*personal hypostasis*', 'life-giving activity', 'grace', 'love' and 'freedom' (Yannaras 2021: 13:3.1).

While Yannaras *does* accord priority to the ecclesial community, it would be mistaken to think that his apophaticism, construed as an epistemology but also as the substratum for a relational ontology ('the social criterion for the verification of knowledge links the mode by which we know with the mode by which we exist, and the *topos* of this linking is the struggle to attain *relation*, or *communion*'; Yannaras 2011a: 2.5.1), is confined to the Christian church. In fact, he holds that an apophatic epistemological *stance* is a unique way of achieving social and political coexistence in general and argues that this apophatic path 'links truth with the common struggle to attain the relations that enable us to share in life', as it opens the way to the possibility of attaining relations in accordance with rationality and relationality/communion, i.e. in accordance with *logos* [λογικὲς σχέσεις], which no authority, convention, contract or revelation promising a compulsory and propositional truth may engender (Yannaras 2011a: 2.5.2).

Given that Yannaras builds on his earlier work over decades and layer upon layer, with later books often revisiting core themes of earlier ones from new angles and perspectives, and given that apophaticism is a central concept integrally related to all other aspects of his thought

—ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, theological and philosophical anthropology, up to political theory—, the above exposition cannot but be oversimplistic. In summary, however, Yannaras attempts to retrieve from the patristic corpus an apophaticism that goes well beyond the *via negativa* in describing God, to receive it into philosophy taking into account its 20th-century Continental developments as well as problems, and to flesh out a theory on the limits of language, the possibility of communicating truth, and the societal, communal verification of knowledge in the context of a relational ontology and anthropology.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We saw in this brief survey that apophaticism has been picked up from the patristic treasure chest by postmodern, theologically-informed philosophical thinkers in both 'East' and 'West' not merely as the *via negativa*, and much less as a 'mystical' or 'subjective' route to knowledge or as a statement to the effect of the impossibility of acquiring knowledge *per se*. Rather than that, it has been developed into the basis for phenomenological, ontological and epistemological theories that combine the rich tradition of the past in terms of theological thought with contemporary philosophical sensibilities in ways that forcibly refute the average dictionary definition of apophaticism. It becomes clear through the case studies of Marion and Yannaras that there is perhaps more to the contemporary philosophical reception of apophaticism than the 'current apophatic rage', particularly as far as theologically-inclined philosophical approaches are concerned. Perhaps it is precisely in apophaticism that the boundaries between phenomenology and ontology are further tested, given e.g. the possible readings of Jean-Luc Marion's exposition. On the other hand, there is much more to be done. Indicatively, Christos Yannaras indulges in presenting post-Roman Western European intellectual history as the polar opposite of an apophatic stance, *always* and in *every case*, thus entirely leaving apophaticism to the East (where it reigned *always* and *in every case*, except when there was Western influence): the 'Western man lacks historico–experiential habits or apperceptions of language's *symbolic* function, of accessing knowledge through relational experience (participating in what is to be known) or through the communal verification of epistemic relationships. He lacks a tradition of the apophatic use of language, i.e., the refusal to exhaust epistemic experience in linguistic articulation (to have reliable epistemic experiences instead of fantasy or illusion, even for 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor

the human heart conceived' (1 Cor. 2:9) in order to have a vision of 'things that cannot be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat' (2 Cor. 12:4)'; Yannaras 2021: 20: 4.4.1). In this context for example, Aquinas' definition of truth, 'veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus' is portrayed as the epitome of cataphaticism, entailing a wooden epistemology in which reality and truth is actually fully identical to its representation in the intellect, with nothing being left out. One is afraid that there is more nuance to it, as the understatement would have it, even though Yannaras would find recent historical/epistemological overviews of our largely failed and quite certainly doomed quest to acquire absolute 'certainty' fascinating (Pasnau 2017) — as would any person interested in apophatic approaches. However, there is also the potential of territories and affinities that are still largely, though by no means completely (e.g. Loudovikos 2019), unexplored. Amongst them are the particularly auspicious, yet at times implicit, convergences between Eastern versions of apophaticism and particular versions of a Western *analogia entis* based on equivocity — those convergences that remain uncharted as of yet, that is. One hopes that this will not elude the attention of philosophers and philosophical theologians in the near future.

References

Bulzan, Daniel. 1997. 'Apophaticism, Postmodernism and Language: Two Similar Cases of Theological Imbalance'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (3): 261–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600049590.

Dallmayr, Fred. 2019. 'Apophatic Community: Yannaras on Relational Being'. *Comparative Philosophy* 10 (1): 3–17. https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2019).100105.

Franke, William. 2007. 'Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (1–3): 61–76. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-006-0012-7.

Heidegger, Martin. 1957. 'Die Onto-Theologische Verfassung Der Metaphysik'. In *Identität Und Differenz*, 35–73. Pfüllingen: Neske.

Jones, Tamsin. 2008. 'Apparent Darkness: Jean-Luc Marion's Retrieval of the Greek Apophatic Tradition'. PhD diss., Cambridge, Massuchetts: Harvard Divinity School.

———. 2011. *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness*. Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Laird, Martin. 2001. '"Whereof We Speak": Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion and the Current Apophatic Rage'. *The Heythrop Journal* 42 (1): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2265.00151.

Loudovikos, Nikolaos. 2019. *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self: Beyond Sprirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*. Brepols. Explorations in Early and Medieval Theology 28. Turnhout.

Marion, Jean-Luc. 2001. *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, no 17. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2008. 'What Cannot Be Said: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love'. In *The Visible and the Revealed*, translated by Christina Gschwandtner, 101–18. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2012. *God without Being*. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mitralexis, Sotiris. 2017. *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor's Theory of Time*. Veritas Series 24. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade.

Pasnau, Robert. 2017. *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Petrà, Basilio. 2015. *Christos Yannaras: L'Orizzonte Apofatico Dell'Ontologia*. Brescia: Morcelliana.

Petrá, Basilio. 2019. *Christos Yannaras: The Apophatic Horizon of Ontology*. Translated by Norman Russell. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.

Yannaras, Christos. 1970. 'The Ontological Content of the Theological Notion of the Person [Τὸ Ὀντολογικὸν Περιεχόμενον Τῆς Θεολογικῆς Ἐννοίας Τοῦ Προσώπου, in Greek]'. PhD diss., Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

———. 1972. *Χάιντεγγερ Καὶ Ἀρεοπαγίτης, ἢ Περὶ Ἀπουσίας Καὶ Ἀγνωσίας Τοῦ Θεοῦ*. Athens: Dodoni.

———. 1982. *Person und Eros: eine Gegenüberstellung der Ontologie der griechischen Kirchenväter und der Existenzphilosophie des Westens*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

———. 1991. *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*. Translated by Keith Schram. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

———. 1999. *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Linguistic Boundaries of Metaphysical Realism [Τὸ Ῥητὸ Καὶ Τὸ Ἄρρητο: Τὰ Γλωσσικὰ Ὅρια Ρεαλισμοῦ Τῆς Μεταφυσικῆς, in Greek]*. Athens: Ikaros.

———. 2005. *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*. Edited by Andrew Louth. Translated by Haralambos Ventis. London; New York: T&T Clark.

———. 2007. *Person and Eros*. Translated by Norman Russell. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.

———. 2011a. *Relational Ontology*. Translated by Norman Russell. Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.

———. 2011b. *Six Philosophical Paintings [Ἔξι Φιλοσοφικὲς Ζωγραφιές, in Greek]*. Athens: Ikaros.

———. 2021. *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Linguistic Boundaries of Metaphysical Realism*. Translated by Jonathan Cole. Winchester: Winchester University Press.

Zachhuber, Johannes. forthcoming. 'Jean-Luc Marion and the Tradition of Negative Theology'. In *Discourses of the Unsayable*, edited by Danny Praet. Indiana: Notre Dame University Press. https://www.academia.edu/3074278/Jean-Luc_Marion_and_the_Tradition_of_Negative_Theology.

Zizioulas, John D. 1985. 'Personhood and Being'. In *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 27–65. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.