

Religious Language: The Cataphatic and Apophatic Ways

The Cataphatic way (via positiva) and the Apophatic way (via negativa) represent two different ways of approaching God through language.

Cataphatic Way

The Cataphatic way uses positive language to describe the qualities and nature of God. For example:

- God is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- God is loving, wise, powerful and just
- God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth
- God is an interventionist God or miracle-worker

The Cataphatic way believes that God can be understood by the human mind and that human concepts and words are useful tools of communicating an understanding about God. In fact, from the point of view of the Cataphatic way, God has revealed Himself to humans through the language of scripture. He has made himself an immanent reality, using scripture to bridge the epistemic distance between the worlds of the human and the divine.

As well as gaining an understanding of God through revealed scripture, the Cataphatic way believes that humans can understand God in other ways. For example:

- God can be understood by looking at His creation
- God can be understood by looking at His miraculous works
- God can be understood through prayer, worship and the sacraments (e.g. holy Communion)
- God can be understood through religious experience

Christians in the Cataphatic way

Most Christian thinkers down the ages have been within the Cataphatic way because most have used positive language to describe God. All the writers of the Bible were certainly within the Cataphatic way. A few prominent Cataphatic thinkers are:

Ignatius of Loyola

In his classic work *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius encouraged Christians to develop what he described as **imaginative contemplation** in prayer. The spiritual exercises he encourages involve **visualisations** based on the Gospel stories of Jesus. For example, you imagine yourself as one of the people Jesus healed and try to experience the feelings the person would have had. In this way, you try to gain a sense of closeness with Jesus and with God. Eventually, you bring this sense of closeness into your everyday life and recognise that `God is in all things`.

St Francis

St Francis was a **nature mystic** who believed that God could be known and experienced through the creation:

"Nature is the language in which God expresses his thought."

St Francis would spend most of his time contemplating the beauty of the natural world - animals, flowers, plants, the elements. For him, nature revealed the handiwork and glory of God. All created things pointed beyond themselves to the wonder of God. He felt the presence of God through God`s creations.

Apophatic Way

The Apophatic way believes that human language is inadequate when trying to communicate an understanding about God. Apophatic Christians believe that the reality of God is beyond human comprehension or `transcendent`. As human language is based upon our understanding of the human world it can only distort and misrepresent God who is beyond the world of space and time.

Instead of using positive language to describe God, the Apophatic way uses negative language and self-contradictory statements. That is, instead of trying to say *what God is*, the Apophatic way says *what God is not*. By saying what God is not, the Apophatic way believes that it helps to take people nearer towards an understanding of God than the Cataphatic way.

Some examples of statements that Apophatic Christians might make about God are:

- God is not light or darkness
- God is neither human nor divine
- God is not visible and not describable
- God is ineffable and infinite
- God is neither knowable or unknowable
- God is not sonship or fatherhood or spirit
- God is neither movable, immovable or at rest

Christians in the Apophatic way

A few prominent Apophatic thinkers are Dionysius (see your other notes), Gregory of Nyssa and Meister Eckhart.

Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa described the spiritual life as a 'mysticism of darkness'. He compared the spiritual life as an ascent from darkness to light and then back into darkness. The spiritual life begins in darkness but gradually you become enlightened through the revealed, biblical understanding of God. However, there comes a point at which you enter into an 'outer darkness'. In other words, you have to leave behind the Cataphatic way and enter into the Apophatic way of God's ineffable, transcendent reality. At this point, there are no words to describe your understanding of God. You are at a place completely beyond words and images.

Meister Eckhart

Meister Eckhart also talked about finding 'light in darkness'. In other words, true enlightenment about God only happens when you have left all human language and human concepts behind. For Eckhart, this enlightenment happens deep within the human soul through an ineffable religious experience. He calls this the 'birth of God in the soul'. Eckhart argued that language about God is not only insufficient for understanding God but that the use of such language hinders true knowledge about God. When people speak about God they block God out of their lives. In other words, the Cataphatic way gets in the way of the true path to knowledge. When Eckhart talked about God he used paradox or self-contradictory statements like:

- "God is everything and nothing"
- "I pray to God that he might rid me of God"

The Cloud of Unknowing

This is a famous mystical text written by an unknown mystic. As the title suggests, it argues that true knowledge about God requires that a person forgets or `unknows` everything they think they know about God. In other words, whatever a person has picked up about God from the Cataphatic way, they have to leave behind in order to achieve true knowledge about God. To understand God there has to be a `darkness of the intellect`. You have to enter the `cloud of forgetting` so that all of the concepts and images you have about God - e.g. that he is a `Father`, that he is `wise`, `loving`, `powerful` etc - no longer distort and mislead you. Only once you have forgotten everything you have learned can you achieve true knowledge about God.

The connection between the Cataphatic and Apophatic ways

Most Cataphatic thinkers acknowledge that whilst they are using positive language, God is ultimately beyond human concepts. They therefore are usually in agreement with the main idea of the Apophatic way.

In the same way, most Apophatic thinkers accept that you need the Cataphatic way to begin the spiritual life and to gain a basic understanding of God. Most present the Apophatic way as a stage that you progress onto once you have been through the Cataphatic way.