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Of Affirmations and Rejections: Anagogical Methodology within the Divine Comedy

In speaking of God, there are two main questions one can ask: “What is God?” and “What is He not?” These two questions about God form the basis of two methods of contemplating God, the Way of the Affirmation of images and the Way of the Rejection of images. At first glance the two Ways seem to be not only incompatible with each other, but also mutually exclusive. While an ascetic such as Thomas a’ Kempis, who practiced the Way of Rejection, spent hours in solitary prayer, Dante, practicing the Way of Affirmation, spent hours in debate with a political opponent. One took the vow of chastity; the other was married and had three children. A’ Kempis was respected for his mystical and spiritual maturity; Dante was renowned for his romantic poetry. What could the respective Ways of two such widely differing practitioners possibly have to do with each other? Although the Way of Rejection practiced by ascetics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas a’ Kempis seem to be incompatible with the Way of Affirmation practiced by Dante, both Ways are not only valid and complementary, but also necessary to an accurate knowledge of God because both Ways are not exclusive methods by themselves but are rather two complementary and progressive stages of one Path towards union with God, complementary parts which exist ultimately and eternally in simultaneous tension with one another.

A brief examination of both methods is in order. The Way of Rejection is the Way in which vision of and union with God is approached through the rejection of all created images. This Way seeks to apprehend the reality of God by determining and rejecting what He is not. As Thomas a` Kempis, a notable ascetic and proponent of this Way states:

A man ought therefore to rise above all creatures, and perfectly to forsake himself and stand in ecstasy of mind, and see that thou, the Creator of all things, hast nothing amongst creatures like unto thyself...Unless a person be disengaged from all creatures, he can not with freedom of mind attend unto divine things (*Imitation of Christ* 234).

Here a' Kempis, posits the fundamental assertion of the Way of Negation: that God is wholly beyond that which he has created, thus all images of God in the created universe should be set aside in favor of contemplating God who alone is worthy to be sought after.

Practitioners of the Way of Rejection go further than simply rejecting the things of the world. They assert that anything one can say about God is in some way false because the Infinitude of God cannot be encompassed by finite speech or conception. This view is best summarized by Pseudo-Dionysius, "There is no speaking of it [God], nor name nor knowledge of it...It is beyond assertion and denial...free of every limitation, beyond every limitation" (*Mystical Theology* 141). Pseudo-Dionysius' conclusion is that God, in essence, cannot be described. This view is supported by Scripture in at least two places. First, when Moses asks to know who God is, the LORD does not give him a list of attributes; the Almighty simply states the incomprehensible fact, "I AM WHO I AM" (*Exodus* 3:14). Beyond every thing that can be said of Him, God simply is. The second is found when Paul describes God, "who alone...dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). According to these two verses, God is so incomprehensible to human minds that the only thing that man (by his own power) can know of God is that He exists.

On the other hand, there is the Way of Affirmation in which union with and vision of God is approached and attained through the images in Creation. C.S. Lewis is characteristically clear in explaining this Way, "every created thing is, in its degree, an image of God, and the ordinate and faithful appreciation of that thing a clue which, truly followed, will lead back to Him" (*Arthurian Torso* 335). According to Lewis' summary of the Way of Affirmation, the beauty and goodness seen in the created world reflect the Creator and cause the beholder of these images to love the supreme Good found in God. Thus the images of creation are legitimate vehicles for the apprehension of the Divine. This method of contemplating God is supported by the doctrine of true creation which asserts that when God created, He did not simply extend Himself, rather, creation was

made by God...and given a genuine, though contingent, real existence of its own, so that it can stand over against Him and know Him as its real Other. Every creature in it possesses a true self which, however much perfected...is never swallowed up or lost in God. Therefore, all God's creatures are images of Him as a work of art is an image of its maker – his, yet in a manner distinct from him (Sayers, *Further Papers* 187).

Because of that true self and distinctness, it follows that for an image (that is, any part of creation) to be a legitimate means of knowing God, it must (1) exist in itself (just as an artist's work has an existence apart from the artist), (2) it must derive from something greater than itself (just as a piece of art's existence is contingent upon its artist), and (3) it must represent in itself the greatness from which it derives (just as a piece of art will, in some way, represent its creator) (*The Figure of Beatrice* 7).

The focal point of the argument is summed up in this question, "In our efforts to know God, what is to be done with Creation?" The Rejectionists argue that since creation is not God, it should be laid aside so that more time and energy might be devoted to God Himself. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Affirmationists assert that the created cosmos is a legitimate means of coming to know God. One camp stresses the incomprehensibility of God; the other, emphasizes the Incarnational tangibility of God.

It turns out that neither Way, pursued in exclusion, will lead to the intended goal of knowing God. At one extreme the Way of Rejection, exclusively pursued, falls into the heresy of Gnosticism expressly forbidden by the Incarnation. While the Way of Affirmation, fanatically followed, becomes an idolatrous blasphemy in which the image is worshiped instead of God to whom the image points. Rather, the two Ways must be somehow both used in order to reach the intended goal: the knowledge of God. However, one cannot fully know God through His creation, yet as a part of the created cosmos, a man cannot fully know God except through His creation. Therefore, both methods are necessary to a complete knowledge of God. How can such a task be practically undertaken? Is it not a rule of logic that an object cannot be simultaneously affirmed and rejected?

The solution to this dilemma is found in the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. As Sayers explains:

the doctrine of the Trinity...affirms that the Image actually exists within the very mystery of the Godhead Itself...The unfathomable and unimaginable being of the Father is known to Itself in the Son... '...the express *image* of His Person' [Heb. 1:3]. It is because of this eternal presence of the Image within the Godhead that it is possible to pursue the Way of Affirmation to the very confrontation of the soul with the immediate presence of God. We may reject all images, but *that* Image we never can reject, because it subsists in the inmost mystery of the Divine Substance (*Further Papers* 187-188).

Christians affirm that there was never a time when the Image of God was not with the Father (NASB, John 1). God is, therefore, eternally known as Affirmation (because of the identity of the Son who is the “express image of God” and because of the Incarnation by which Christ affirmed His creation) and also as Negation (because God is also the incomprehensible and unimaginable “I AM”). However, this eternal reality can only be manifested to and experienced by temporal beings as successive stages. What is eternal is always present; therefore, distinctions which exist in time are dissolved when transposed to eternity. Thus the two Ways are related in their ultimate fulfillment as an eternal unity which is temporally experienced as a successive progression towards that final reality.

This reality is clearly and elegantly illustrated in the structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. As a narrative epic, the Comedy’s structure makes it inherently difficult to simultaneously describe two distinct yet unified objects. For example, in the Sacramental pageant of the earthly paradise atop Mount Purgatory, Dante beholds the Griffin (a half-eagle-and-half-lion beast which symbolizes the dual natures of Christ) in successive forms within the eye of Beatrice. First the form of the Griffin is seen to be an eagle, and then it is perceived in the form of a lion and so on successively, but never simultaneously (Purg. XXXII 118-123). In other words, although the two natures of Christ are inextricably united in one Person, Dante can only behold the two natures successively and never simultaneously. By mirroring the experiential distinction between eternally united realities (the two natures of Christ) in the very structure of his work, Dante ingeniously illustrates the distinctive and unitive principles behind the relationship between the Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation.

Before an extended examination, it would be helpful to determine the principles governing the temporally distinct yet eternally united nature of the Ways of Affirmation and Negation. The distinctive aspect of the relation between the two Ways can be summed up in the verse, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25). Those who wish to truly know God must be willing to reject all things for the sake of God. Yet in dedicating their temporal lives to God, they find eternal life in Christ (John 17:3). On the other hand, the harmony and fundamental unity of the two Ways is best expressed in John’s Prologue, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18). Although man had no hope of ever knowing God, by becoming a man, Christ became “an object for the senses” and made the Father known to men (*On the Incarnation* 43; John 14:9-14). These principles are actuated and practically realized in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri whose work is “In the literature of Europe the greatest record of the Way of Affirmation of Images” (*Figure 11*).

The progressive aspect of the relationship between the two Ways is seen in at least two passages of the *Comedy*. In the midst of her rebuke of Dante's slothfulness and sin, Beatrice states:

“And if my dying had deceived you of
 That utmost beauty, well, what mortal thing
 Afterward could have drawn you to its love?
 Instead you should have followed me on wing –
 For then I was no longer like those lies –
 When first you felt their arrow and its sting.
 ...

He turned his steps along a way not true,
 Pursuing the false images of good,
 Which promise all and never follow through”
 (Esolen Canto 30.130-132, 31.43-57).

Here Beatrice refers to one of the major periods of Rejection in Dante's life – her own death. Beatrice was to Dante his image of God (Canto XXX.28-33). When she died, her physical absence forced upon Dante a Rejection of her image. But instead of pursuing God, Dante turned aside to “false images” and worthless deceits which obscured him from his duty to know God. The initial negation of her body, should have spurred Dante to a greater affirmation of her soul. Thus, Dante demonstrates through his own story the temporally segmental nature of the two Ways.

In a second passage, almost right before the Beatific Vision, Dante must again turn away from Beatrice in order to behold and know God,

“I prayed – and she, who was as far away
 As she appeared, yet smiled and looked at me;
 Then turned again to the eternal Spring.”
 (Canto XXXI.91-93).

Beatrice has led Dante through the heavenly spheres to the very heart of the Empyrean and now that her function as an image has been fulfilled, she commends Dante to God and turns herself to contemplating Him.

The difference in this final rejection is that the greatest affirmation of all follows it almost immediately. In the final ecstatic vision, Dante sees the Second Person of the Trinity, “tinted with the figure of a Man” and struggles to comprehend the unity of the two natures within the Person. He ends by admitting,

“But mine were not the feathers for that flight,
 Save that the truth I longed for came to me,
 Smiting my mind like lightning flashing bright”

(Canto XXXIII.133-141).

Even in the final state of contemplation, it is God who simultaneously reveals who He is and what He is not. There in the center of the unimaginable Godhead (negation) lies the very Image of God who is “tinted with the figure of a man” (affirmation). The eternal unity that Dante could only experience as distinct in the figure of the Griffin, God grants to him here in the Beatific Vision. Thus in beholding God Himself, Dante is allowed to grasp the eternal unitive principle behind the Ways of Affirmation and Rejection.

In conclusion, it would seem that the Way of Affirmation and the Way of Negation are both necessary to the apprehension of God. Either Way pursued exclusively does not lead to the end of seeing God. The Way of the Negation of images by itself leads to a rejection of all images, even the Final Image of God. The Way of the Affirmation of images by itself leads to idolatry which, obviously, does not lead to union with God. Since God exists as both an Affirmation and a Negation by virtue of the Incarnate Image of God within the Unimaginable Godhead, there is fundamental unity between the two Ways. However, because man is a creature of time, he cannot experience two methods of approach to God simultaneously and must therefore pursue God in successive stages of affirmation and negation until the final Beatific Vision in which the distinction necessitated by time dissolves into the unity of eternity. This temporal distinction is what allows one part of the Path to be emphasized over the other. There will always be emphasis on one Way over the other during this life, but never exclusion. This is why both the ascetic and the poet can legitimately pursue the presence of God either by the Way of Affirmation or the Way of Negation. It is because the two are fundamentally united in the Godhead and are thus tending towards the same goal of knowing God.

Annotated Bibliography

A' Kempis, Thomas. *The Imitation of Christ*. Ed. Rosalie DeRosset. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007.

A beloved Christian devotional classic, *The Imitation* is a series of short essays and contemplative elegies about the methods of following Christ. Primarily, the book stresses the Way of Negation and is therefore helpful to this paper as an example of Apophatic theology.

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*. Trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V. 5th ed. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary P. 1993.

Written when he was still a very young man, this treatise by the Sainted Bishop of Alexandria is the second part of a larger work. In it, Athanasius gives a comprehensive defense of the doctrine of the Incarnation affirming that it was truly God who became truly man. Written sometime in the fourth century to a fellow Christian by the name of Macarius, this book is still one of the foundational texts on the doctrine of the Incarnation. In regards to the paper above, Athanasius provides a compelling narrative of the Incarnation wherein he strongly affirms the goodness of the flesh.

Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Ed. Anthony Esolen. Canada: Toronto, 2003.

Dante's *Comedy* is perhaps the greatest doctor of the Way of Affirmation. His work shows the different stages of this Way tracing its beginnings in the first sight of Beatrice all the way to the final ecstatic vision of God. It is a personal record of how the images in Creation led him to the Creator.

Lewis, C.S. *Williams and the Arthurian*. Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974.

After the unexpected and sudden death of Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, his friend undertook the task of writing a comprehensive commentary of Williams' Arthurian poetry. William's beliefs about the two Ways found their most eloquent expression within the poems of this volume. In regards to this paper, Lewis' description of both Ways is particularly helpful.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

One of the most influential mystics and neo-Platonists of Christian thought, Pseudo-Dionysius was one of the first to comprehensively map out the Way of Negation. His thoughts about the Way of Rejection are very illuminating.

Sayers, Dorothy. "The Fourfold Interpretation of the *Comedy*," *Introductory Papers on Dante*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.

In this set of essays, Dorothy Sayers, essayist, novelist, playwright, and friend of Charles Williams illumines a variety of introductory subjects about Dante. From Dante's use imagery to the paradoxes of the *Comedy*, Sayers applies her characteristic wit, insight, and clarity. In regards to this paper, her essay "The Fourfold Interpretation of The *Comedy*" provides an interpretive framework on which a proper understanding of the levels of meaning within the *Comedy* can be built.

Sayers, Dorothy. "The Poetry of the Image in Dante and Charles Williams.", Further Papers on Dante. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957.

The companion volume to the *Introductory Papers*, this set of essays continues to examine various topics within Dante Studies. In the essay cited above, Sayers lays out a general outline of the Ways of Affirmation and Negation.

The New American Standard Bible. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation. 1995.

The New Testament abounds with the Trinitarian experience of the early Church. Especially in the writings of John, Jesus speaks at length about His relation to the other Persons of the Godhead. Also, in the writings of Paul, many verses are used by both egalitarian and eternally ordered social Trinitarians to support their positions. The Bible is the foundation upon which all conceptions of the Trinity should be laid.

Williams, Charles. The Figure of Beatrice. Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2005.

Charles Williams, poet, novelist, essayist, and member of the Inklings, examines Dante's entire corpus in light of Beatrice's significance. In this intense and illuminating study, Williams pays close attention to the importance of the Beatrician figure to the anagogical interpretation of Dante's work. Beginning from the *Vita Nuova*, Williams traces the development of the figure of Beatrice and works his way to the *Pardisio* in which the image reaches its fulfillment. For those wishing to further understand the Way of Affirmation, this is an invaluable resource.