



## Amsterdam Lectures 2011-12:

### Eastern Orthodox Theology: a Personal Introduction

#### Lecture II: Who is God? The doctrine of the Holy Trinity; apophatic theology.

At the heart of Christianity is the Cross, and the One who was executed on it: the Lord Jesus Christ. But who was this man, for whatever else we believe about him, he was certainly a man? The earliest witnesses to Jesus, which we find in the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, make all sorts of suggestions: a prophet, 'The Prophet', Son of man, Son of God, Word of God, the Wisdom and Power of God. How Christians and the Church followed up these suggestions I shall pursue (or at least refer to) later on in this series. But for now I want to make a much simpler observation. The Gospels present Jesus as a teacher, a wonderworker, one who came to be thought, in ways not really explored in the Gospels, save for his opposition, to those called 'Pharisees', to be a threat: a threat to the Jewish religion, in some sense, and beyond that a political threat (that he was crucified makes clear that the execution was performed by the Roman occupiers of Palestine). But how did Jesus think of himself? In what way did he want to be remembered? As a prophet and teacher, he preached; parables seem to have characterized his teaching. But what did he teach? There is not a great deal in his teaching that cannot be paralleled in contemporary or earlier Jewish teaching. Even the twofold command – to love God and to love one's neighbour – is presented in St Luke's Gospel, not as Jesus' teaching, but as a summary of the Law provided by a Jewish lawyer in answer to Jesus' question. Jesus is not presented as a great teacher with a new message: he speaks with a new authority, but what he preaches is the message of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is not a philosopher with some new teaching, some new interpretation of the universe, nor is he presented as a moral teacher with a new moral code, though it is true that love is central to the way he presented his teaching, and this is echoed in the Apostolic witness to Christ—not least in the presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of St John and in the letters of St Paul. This sense that Jesus is not summed up in his teaching, whether philosophical or moral, is underlined by the fact that Jesus wrote nothing himself; though this aligns him with another mysterious person in the Greek tradition, Socrates. But in two ways Jesus gave his disciples something to remember him by. When the disciples asked him how to pray, he gave them the, Lord's Prayer, the 'Our Father'; and on the night before he suffered, he asked his disciples to remember him by gathering together to break bread and share wine, receiving them as his body and blood.

This seems to me very significant for any attempt to develop an understanding of God that follows the Christian tradition. Had Jesus presented himself as a philosopher, then we would naturally have looked to him for teaching on the nature of God and his relationship to the world, the nature of divine providence and so on. Had Jesus presented himself primarily as a moral teacher, then we would not be surprised if his notion of God turned on how God is a source of moral values, moral commandments, and so on. And in the tradition of Western philosophy, going right back to Plato, we can see the way God has been invoked as the first cause, the ultimate explanation of everything, or as One who underwrites our moral values, either by issuing divine commandments for us to observe, or as the One who as creator understands in a fundamental way human nature, so that from that understanding we can derive a set of moral values, or a natural law. All this might well be very important, and certainly a great deal of human thought has been devoted to understanding how God is the ultimate meaning of the universe or the ultimate source of moral values. But the ways Jesus wanted his disciples to remember him seems to me to suggest a different way of approaching the mystery of God. The Lord's Prayer first and foremost teaches us that God is the One to whom we pray; He is not some ultimate principle or final value, but one to whom we can address our prayers, one with whom we can enter into a relationship. We call him 'Father'; we are his children, his sons and daughters. The petitions of the Lord's Prayer, as St Maximos the Confessor put it, constitute a theology, but it is theology of a particular sort. As St Maximos puts it:

For hidden within a limited compass this prayer contains the whole purpose and aim of which we have just spoken [viz., the divine counsel whose purpose is the deification of our nature];... The prayer includes petitions for everything that the divine Word effected through His self-emptying in the Incarnation, and it teaches us to strive for those blessings of which the true provider is God the Father alone through the natural mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit...

Maximos goes on to discuss the seven mysteries contained in the prayer: 'theology, adoption of sons by grace, equality with the angels, participation in eternal life, the restoration of human nature..., the abolition of the law of sin, and the destruction of the tyranny ... of the evil one.' These are not just mysteries to contemplate, still less to solve; they are mysteries that draw us into communion with God. They reveal the mystery of the Trinity (which is what Maximos means by 'theology', θεολογία), and that this opens up to us the possibility of adoption as sons and daughters in the Son, Christ. This state of adoption grants us equality with the angels ('on earth, as in heaven'). We participate in the divine life through making Christ Himself our food, pre-eminently in the Holy Eucharist. Human nature is restored to itself; for human kind has been fragmented by the Fall, we are separated from one another, opposed to each other—restoration takes place through forgiveness ('Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'). But life on earth remains a constant struggle against evil; we recognize this as we pray for deliverance from temptation. And we seek deliverance from the power of the evil one. Because these mysteries are about our transformation into God, deification, they are presented to us in the Lord's prayer as petitions, expressions of our desire, or perhaps better, to use a phrase of St Thomas Aquinas, as interpreters of our desire: *desiderii interpres* (ST IIaIIae. 83. 1 ad 1). Maximos sees this desire as a response to God's love for us, in particular, God's love for us manifest in the Incarnation and Self-emptying of the Son of God, and a response that demands of us a similar self-emptying: '[m]oreover, by emptying themselves of the passions

they lay hold of the divine to the same degree as that to which, deliberately emptying Himself of his own sublime glory, the Word of God truly became man.’

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. For this lecture, I want simply to consider the question: who is God? and approach it from the angle of seeing God first and foremost as the One to whom we pray.

If we turn to God in prayer, we expect him to listen, to hear our prayers. What we might mean by that is a mystery—and mystery, in the sense not of a puzzle to solve, but something of which we have some understanding, but an even deeper sense that such understanding will never be exhaustive, there will always be more to say, is something we shall encounter throughout these lectures—but it at least means that we can be attentive to God and expect his attention to us. In some kind of way, prayer opens up a personal relationship; prayer is only possible to persons (except metaphorically), and can only be addressed to a person. So, if we think of God as one to whom we pray, we are thinking of God in personal terms. I have put it like that, rather than saying ‘as a person’, for two reasons. First of all, the notion of a person is quite a slippery notion, as we shall discover later on when we think what we mean by saying that human beings are persons created ‘in God’s image’. Secondly, do we Christians think of God as ‘a’ person? Don’t we in fact think of God as a Trinity of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How did Christians come by the notion of the Trinity? And what does it mean?

The word ‘trinity’, from the Latin *trinitas*, means a set of three, not a random set of three, but three things that in some way belong together. And *trinitas* is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *τριάς*. Despite appearances, there is really no suggestion in the Latin word that it means a kind of threefold unity, a tri-unity, so I don’t think we need as Orthodox abandon the words ‘Trinity’ and ‘trinitarian’ for the Greek-based ‘Triad’ and ‘triadological’, as some do. The word itself, *τριάς*, does not occur in the New Testament; it first emerges in the second century in the Christian apologist, Theophilus of Antioch. But the set of three to which the Trinity refers is frequent in the New Testament, for the set of three is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Son is the Lord Jesus Christ, who prays to God as his Father; the Holy Spirit is a mysterious presence of God, experience in the Christian Church. There is, and remains in Greek theology in particular, a sense that ‘God’ is the Father; a common expression in Greek theology in the fourth and fifth centuries, and indeed later, speaks of *ὁ Θεὸς καὶ Πατήρ*, ‘the God and Father’, often translated, rather lazily, as ‘God the Father’. But there is a very strong sense in the New Testament and in later Greek theology, that ‘God’, *ὁ Θεός*, refers to the Father. This usage makes clear that the monotheism of the Hebrews is something affirmed, not qualified, by the Christian faith. What happened – very quickly, within decades of the Crucifixion of Christ – is that Christ is seen as ranked with the God and Father as God, and (perhaps less clearly) the Holy Spirit, too. How did the Church move from the Hebrew monotheism of the early disciples of Christ to the Trinitarian theology that has come to define Christianity? In one way, this is a long and complex story that we cannot tell here; but in another way it is a very simple story, indeed hardly a story at all, rather a realization we can trace in the earliest documents of the Christian Faith. In fact, the long and complex story might rather be regarded as an account of the efforts by the Church to avoid a long series of misunderstandings of a faith expressed primarily in worship and prayer, but easily misconceived in concepts and philosophical categories. We may touch on the

‘long and complex story’ at times in our lectures, but here let us look at the simple realization.

There are several events in the Gospels where the Trinitarian nature of God is revealed: examples are the Baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, and the Agony in the Garden. At Christ’s baptism, as the Lord ascends from the waters, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends on him in the form of a dove, and there is heard the voice of the Father saying, ‘You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’ (or in the Lucan version: ‘You are my son, today I have begotten you’). The Orthodox Church celebrates the Baptism of Christ on the Feast of the Theophany – the manifestation of God. In the icon of the Baptism, or Theophany, the Trinity is intimated in the man, the dove, and the Father’s blessing. The apolytikion of the Feast expresses its meaning in these words:

As you were baptized in the Jordan, Lord, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest, for the voice of the Father bore witness to you, naming you the Beloved Son; and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the sureness of the word. Christ God, who appeared and enlightened the world, glory to you.

Notice that it is the *worship* of the Trinity that is made manifest at this feast, not the doctrine; as we contemplate the mystery of Christ’s baptism we are drawn to worship the Holy Trinity, who enlightens the world through the Incarnate Son.

At the Transfiguration, Christ appeared to the inner three of the disciples – Peter, James and John – transfigured in his glory and accompanied by the prophets Moses and Elias. Again there is a voice from heaven, the voice of the Father saying, ‘This is my Beloved Son’; again the Spirit appears, this time in the cloud that descends on the scene, from which the voice is heard: the cloud representing the divine presence, the *Shekinah*, that filled the tabernacle in the Old Testament. This time, however, what is manifest is principally that the Son belongs to the Holy Trinity, and therefore that it is as God that Christ is going to his voluntary passion; on the Cross, ‘one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh’, in a phrase that became popular from the fifth century onwards. The kontakion of the Feast interprets its meaning in these words:

You were transfigured on the mountain, and your Disciples beheld your glory, O Christ God, as far as they were able; that when they saw you crucified, they might know that your suffering was voluntary, and might proclaim to the world that you are truly the brightness of the Father.

Throughout Holy Week, it is made clear that Christ’s suffering was voluntary; in the anaphora of St John Chrysostom this is expressed by referring to ‘the night in which he was given up, or rather gave himself up, for the life of the world’. And this is made clear in the mystery of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ withdrew with the inner three of the disciples to pray to the Father. To his disciples, he says ‘my soul is greatly troubled, even unto death’; to his Father, he prays, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you’. St Luke records that ‘being in agony he prayed still more intensely; and his sweat became as drops of blood falling on the earth’.

It is here, I think, that we see most clearly what it was that compelled Christians to think of the One God in terms of the Holy Trinity. For in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Father and the Son are clearly distinct. Metropolitan Philaret spoke of ‘The love the Father crucifying, the love of the Son crucified, and the love of the Holy Spirit triumphant in the invincible power of the cross.’ All three persons of the Trinity are involved in the crucifixion as an act of redeeming love, but they are clearly distinct. And that distinction, as the prayer in Gethsemane makes clear, is articulated *through prayer*. It is the Son’s prayer to the Father that makes clear the distinction – the *personal* distinction – between the Father and the Son. But there is a dual character to the Son’s prayer to the Father, for the Son prays to the Father both as God the Son, and as the Incarnate Son: his prayer expresses both something of the nature of the relationship within the Divine Trinity, and the way Christ prays to God, as his Father, as the Son, the ‘firstborn among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:29). There is one person praying – the Incarnate Son of God (there is no separate human person; we shall more of this later on) – but his prayer expresses a dual filial relationship: the relationship of the Son to the Father within the Trinity and the relationship of the human sonship that God the Son assumed in the Incarnation, a relationship into which we are incorporated by the adoption as sons and daughters that is effected in baptism, so that we are ‘counted worthy... with boldness and without condemnation to dare to call upon the God in heaven, as Father, and to say: Our Father...’. We can see something of this duality in the Gospels. All the Gospels refer to Jesus’ prayer to his Father; Jesus is depicted as spending whole nights alone in prayer to God who is his Father. These accounts inspire us to devote ourselves seriously to prayer. But there are other passages where Christ is, as it were, assimilated to God; we are not so much expected to enter into his prayer, as to pray to him, to find in Jesus the Lord the source of succour and salvation. An example is the passage in St Matthew’s Gospel, where the Lord says: ‘Come to me, all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest for your souls’ (Matt. 11:28–9). This sense of the Incarnate Son as sent by the Father and turning to the Father in prayer is the fundamental *Leitmotif* of St John’s Gospel.

This realization of the dual aspect of Christ – leading us in prayer to God, and also being the One to whom we pray, ‘one of the Trinity’ – is something we shall explore later on when we come to consider who Christ is: what is called ‘Christology’. Here we are interested in the other side of this: the way in which a relationship within the Godhead between Father and Son, articulated in prayer, brought about a realization of God as Trinity. You might say that what I have just said only makes clear a relationship between the Father and the Son: what about the Holy Spirit? It was, indeed, popular among Western scholars in the last century or so to maintain that in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity there was a ‘binitarian’ stage, a stage of the ‘two-in-oneness’ of the Father and the Son in the Godhead. Such a view seems to me much less popular nowadays, and indeed it seems to me to be based on a false model of doctrinal ‘development’, as if the doctrine of the Trinity is really ‘later’ than the New Testament and the revelation of Christ. Rather, I have spoken in terms of ‘realization’: the realization that the One Godhead embraced persons in relationship, a realization that may have taken centuries to articulate in the language that the Church later regarded as canonical; nevertheless that realization seems to me aboriginal.

But what about the Holy Spirit? The language about the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures is indeed much less clear; it is not always clear that it is a matter of a person, so much as a way of talking about the divine presence or activity. First, however, we must make one thing clear. What I have outlined above is not, in any sense, a *proof* of the relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity; it is certainly not a proof in the sense of explaining *why* there are Father and Son in the Trinity. It is a point frequently made by the Fathers that we cannot answer the question ‘Why?’ in relation to the Godhead; only in matters concerning the created order can we hope to answer the question ‘Why?’, and not always then. All we can hope to do is catch some glimpse of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but we shall never understand it. The case of the Holy Spirit may well be more mysterious; it does not make it less important, even essential, as we shall see in later lectures. There are, however, some things we can say even now. First, as Fathers, such as St Athanasios and St Basil, pointed out when the divinity of the Holy Spirit was called in question in the fourth century, the role of the Spirit is to effect the presence of the Holy Spirit in those who believe: deification takes place through the Spirit, all the sacraments involve the descent of the Holy Spirit in power. None of this would make sense if the Holy Spirit did not belong to the Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit comes in answer to prayer, to his being invoked, which would only make sense if he, too, were personal. And, perhaps most significant, the Holy Spirit is invoked in Christian worship alongside the Father and the Son: baptism is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian worship is addressed to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit – or, more briefly, to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. ‘Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit’ is one of the most-repeated phrases in Christian worship, both in the West and the East. It is in what appear to be liturgical passages, preserved in the early writings of the Church, including the New Testament, that we find the most consistent witness to the Trinity; the earliest Christian hymn we know – ‘Gladdening Light’, Φῶς Ἰλαρόν – is Trinitarian in structure and meaning.

Gradually the Church developed a terminology in which to express her understanding of God the Holy Trinity, one God in three Persons. In order to achieve clarity, the Church came to adopt a technical language. We need to be clear about what kind of clarity was sought. At no point did the Church seek to solve the mystery of the Trinity: that was an accusation often made, whether justly or not, against the heretics, the proponents of positions rejected by the Church. We speak of ‘definitions’ of the Faith, most notably, in relation to Christology, of the ‘Chalcedonian Definition’ issued by the Œcumenical Council in 451. ‘Definition’, in English, at least, suggests some precise description of something: an account of what something really is. But the etymological origins of the word rather suggests establishing a boundary (Latin: *finis*), indeed the Greek word used by the Council - ὄρος, *horos* – simply means a boundary. The Chalcedonian ‘Definition’, then, should be understood not as defining precisely how Christ is both God and man and yet one, but rather laying down a boundary, beyond which is heresy. For, although the mysteries of the Faith are beyond understanding, they are not beyond *mis*understanding, and the conciliar definitions are intended to prevent such misunderstanding.

The first technical term to be introduced was the word ὁμοούσιος, *homoousios*, consubstantial: it was affirmed of the Son in the creed of the Council of Nicaea, the First Œcumenical Council (AD 325), that he is *homoousios*, consubstantial, with the Father, meaning that he derives his very being from the Father and is equal to him,

not some sort of subordinate. Later in the century, it was made clear that the Holy Spirit, too, is consubstantial with the Father. This entailed the assertion that there was only one divine substance or essence, or *ousia*: and that this expresses the unity of the Godhead. But the divine *ousia* or essence was not to be understood – as with other generic terms – as what it is to be divine; that would not have safeguarded the unity of God, just as one human nature does not mean that there is only one man. Rather the divine *ousia* was understood to be the Father’s being – the being of the one God we call Father – which has been extended in unbroken continuity to the Son, through begetting (γέννησις), and to the Holy Spirit, through procession (ἐκπόρευσις): this was expressed in the amplified version of the Creed of Nicaea, issued in connexion with the Second Œcumenical Council of Constantinople (held in 381), which defined the orthodox religion of the Emperor Theodosios’ Christian Roman Empire (this version of the creed is often referred to as the ‘Nicene Creed’, and is the form of the creed used by both the Eastern and Western Churches in worship, especially in the Eucharist Liturgy – except by the Armenians, who use the actual creed of 325). By this time further terminology was developing (not stated explicitly in the Nicene Creed): God exists as three persons in one substance or essence. The preferred term for ‘person’ in Greek was not πρόσωπον, *prosopon*, though this word was used, but ὑπόστασις, *hypostasis*, a word that could mean being, and is an exact equivalent (‘calque’) of the Latin *substantia*, substance; so that the Greeks spoke of one *ousia* and three *hypostases*. The Latins, on the other hand, used their traditional terminology that can be traced back to Tertullian in the early third century, of one *substantia* and three *personae* – one substance and three persons. It is easy to see that this terminology might lead to confusion and Latins and Greeks spoke to one another. But that is not our concern now.

The affirmation of One God existing in three co-equal Persons leads naturally to the notion of the Trinity – *trinitas*, τριάς – and we begin to find the Christian God thought of simply as the Trinity. In the early fifth century, we find works called *On the Trinity*: both Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo wrote works with such a title. Alongside prayer to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit – the form of prayer found in many liturgies, out of which emerged the realization of the mystery of the Trinity – we find devotion directed directly to the Trinity, for instance in St Gregory the Theologian’s poem, ‘On his Life’, which ends with the prayer:

I pray that it [my life] will end up in the unshakeable home  
Where lives the bright union of my Trinity,  
By whose faint reflection we are now raised up.<sup>1</sup>

The note of personal devotion is manifest in his reference to ‘my Trinity’. In Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, we can, I think, see the beginnings of a concern for what one might call the ‘mystery of the Trinity’; in Cyril’s *On the Holy Trinity*, we find something much more traditional – a sense of God the Father revealed through the Son and the Holy Spirit, both consubstantial with the Father.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Concerning his own life’, lines 1947–9, in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Autobiographical Poems*, ed. and trans. by Carolinne White, Cambridge Medieval Classics 6, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp, 152–3.

This traditional approach is found in what is perhaps the most developed expression of Greek theology: the first eight chapters of *On the Orthodox Faith* by the eighth-century theologian, St John Damascene.<sup>2</sup> This begins with an assertion of the incomprehensibility of God: for all the technical language John is going to introduce, it remains axiomatic for John that here we are approaching a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. It is not, however, as if God kept the mysteries of his being in some kind of jealous possessiveness; rather God wants to make himself known, he longs to share his being and life with his creatures. Only in that coming to know the uncreated God, we shall be overwhelmed by the mystery of his being, the inexhaustibility of any knowledge we may glimpse of him. He goes on to outline various ways in which the sense of the mystery of God has been preserved in Christian theology: we cannot know God, only what he is not – not-finite, not-created, not-visible – something expressed in Greek by the alpha privative, so that we have almost a theology of the alpha-privative, for instance, at the beginning of the anaphora of St John Chrysostom, where God is confessed as ἀέκφραστος, ἀπερινόητος, ἀόρατος, ἀκατάληπτος – ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable; we do not know God, we only know ‘about’ him; we do not know his being or essence, only his activity, ἐνέργεια, or power. John evokes a distinction between *theologia* and *oikonomia* – theology and the economy – God in Himself, essentially the Trinity, and God in his dealings with the created order; we know the latter much better than the former, though even in the economy much is beyond our understanding. He also refers to the distinction, introduced into Christian theology by one we call ‘Dionysios the Areopagite’ between kataphatic and apophatic theology – theology of affirmation, in which we affirm what God has revealed of himself, and theology of negation, in which we deny that our concepts match up to the reality of God; apophatic theology being more fundamental. John Damascene then introduces us to the notion of God as One, and underlines the reality of the One God confessed in the Scriptures and the many gods of pagan polytheism (in making so much of this, John may have had in mind his Muslim contemporaries and political masters, for he was writing in Palestine after the Arab conquest of the seventh century). This one God, however, manifests himself as Word and Spirit, which flow from the Father, and are one with him: it is through the Word and the Spirit that we come to know God, the Father. We then come to a long chapter, ‘On the holy Triad’, in which John explores what we can make of the holy Trinity. Again, he starts by emphasizing that this is all beyond our comprehension, all we can hope for is to avoid misunderstanding that will lead us away from God rather than open our hearts to him. He introduces the language we have already mentioned: the one *ousia* of God, the three *hypostases* of the Trinity. But he also introduces a concept that had not hitherto been used with much confidence in relation to the Holy Trinity: the idea of περιχώρησις, perichoresis, interpenetration or coinherence. The persons of the Trinity are not separate from each other, as human persons are, rather they interpenetrate one another, without losing their distinctness as persons, their reality coincides or coinheres. John is quite clear, in contrast to some modern Orthodox theologians, that what is the case with the Trinity is *not* the case with human beings; the Trinitarian communion of persons is not a model for human communion. Rather it is characteristic of the *uncreated* nature of the Godhead that the persons should coinhere with one another; with created

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail, see Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 89–116.

natures it is different – in reality they are separate, any communion they have is a form of sharing.

It seems to me that the doctrine of *perichoresis*, coinherence, that John introduces in the Christian theology, expresses well the realization that within the Trinity there is relationship, a relationship expressed in prayer. There is, as it were, a kind of mutual yielding within the Trinity: the Father makes space for the Son and the Spirit (to use obviously inappropriate language), and Son and the Spirit yield to the Father as they turn to him in prayer. This is expressed, in the rare economy of paint, in the Trinity Icon of St Andrey Rublev: the mutual gestures of the Father (on the left, as you face it), the Son who becomes incarnate (in the middle) and the Holy Spirit (on the right), are gestures of mutual respect, yielding, and therefore affirmation.

There is a beautiful passage in a short treatise by Clement of Alexandria, ‘Who is the rich man who is being saved’, which was composed, perhaps at the end of the second century:

Behold the mysteries of love, and then you will have a vision of the bosom of the Father, whom the only-begotten God alone declared. God in His very self is love, and for love’s sake He became visible to us. And while in his ineffability He is Father, in his sympathy with us he has become Mother. By his loving the Father became feminine, a great sign of which is the one he begat from himself; and the fruit born of love is love. For this reason he came down, for this reason he put on human nature, for this reason he willingly suffered what it belongs to being human, so that having been measured to the weakness of those he loved, he might in return measure us to his own power.<sup>3</sup>

It flows from love’s very self, Clement is saying, that the Son became human in the Incarnation. His self-emptying (measuring himself to our weakness) expresses his very being: the love that reveals that he belongs to the Father’s bosom. In emptying himself, the Son does not become something else, he simply expresses himself, expresses what he is: love from love.

As we follow this through, I think we can begin to grasp the deeper meaning of the stress on the apophatic, on human incomprehensibility in face of the mystery of God, that we have already encountered in these lectures, and that might be regarded as the signature tune of Orthodox theology of the twentieth century. For apophatic theology is not about some kind of higher way with concepts, some ultimate refinement of a human conceptual theology—kataphatic theology and apophatic theology being deployed as we handle our concepts of God like the tacking a pilot uses in a sailing boat. To say that apophatic theology is fundamental is to say something rather different, something expressed in a telling way by Vladimir Lossky towards the end of his great work, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*:

We have had again and again, in the course of our study of the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, to refer to the apophatic attitude which is characteristic of its religious thought. As we have seen, the negations which draw attention to the divine incomprehensibility are not prohibitions upon

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<sup>3</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur*, 37.

knowledge: apophaticism, so far from being a limitation, enables us to transcend all concepts, every sphere of philosophical speculation. It is a tendency towards an ever-greater plenitude, in which knowledge is transformed into ignorance, the theology of concepts into contemplation, dogmas into experience of ineffable mysteries. It is, moreover, an existential theology involving man's entire being, which sets him upon the way of union, which obliges him to be changed, to transform his nature that he may attain to the true *gnosis* which is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity. Now, this 'change of heart', this μετάνοια, means repentance. The apophatic way of Eastern theology is the repentance of the human person before the face of the living God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1957, p. 238.