

Apophatism and Art

By Federico Aguirre*

1. Apophatic Aesthetics

Apophatism is one of the most fruitful concepts of Christian thought. Besides its importance in Greek patristic literature and medieval Western theology, its influence reaches as far as modern philosophy. A particularly interesting field of influence is modern art, in which some specialists speak of an “apophatic aesthetic”¹. In this context, apophatism is defined as a negative way of expression, that is mainly materialized in abstract art, which appears as a reaction to academic art. However, according to the view of the Spanish philosopher Amador Vega², apophatic aesthetics is a deeply religious pursuit, an authentic way of expressing the divine in the time of God’s death.

The *Black Square* of Kazimir Malevich (fig. 1) has been presented as a model of apophatic aesthetics, because as Malevich himself mentions, it is a work that depicts nothing but a dessert, the simple feeling of emptiness³. Among the myriad interpretations that have been made on this work, particularly interesting is the reading of Giannis Ziogas⁴,

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1. A. Vega, *Arte y santidad: Cuatro lecciones de estética apofática*, [Cuadernos de la cátedra Jorge Oteiza], Univ. Públic Navarra/Nafarroako Unib Publik, Navarra 2005; W. Franke, *On what cannot be said: Apophatic discourses in philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts*, vol. 2: *Modern and contemporary transformations*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 2017.

2. A. Vega, *Arte y santidad*, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

3. K. Malevich, *El mundo no objetivo*, Doble J, Sevilla 2007.

4. Io. Ziogas, *Ὁ βυζαντινὸς Μάλεβιτς*, Stachy Publications, Athens 2000.

who argues that the *Black Square*, is a Byzantine icon from which the various compositional levels have been removed. The reference of the Black Square to the Byzantine icon becomes particularly obvious if we observe how it was placed in its first exhibition in Saint Petersburg in 1915 (fig. 2). As can be observed, the Black Square is placed in the so-called “corner of beauty”, that is, the place where it is customary to place the icon stand (fig. 3).

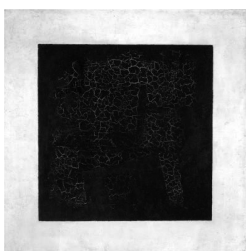


Fig. 1

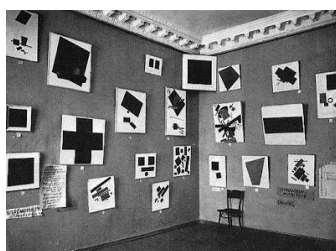


Fig. 2

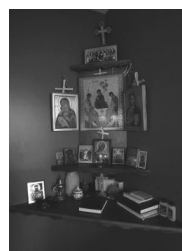


Fig. 3

It should be noted that the relationship between avant-garde art and Byzantine icon is also observed in many other works, but in the case of Malevich it is a reference to the liturgical dimension of the icon, which is placed in the corner of the room because the sanctifying gaze of the saint passes, through the icon, throughout the space. In other cases, such as in the works of Gustav Klimt, the reference to the Byzantine icon simply remains on a stylistic level. The importance of Malevich's reference lies in the fact that the Black Square literally wants to function as a hagiography.

The interest of avant-garde art in Byzantium has many levels and lies mainly in a spiritual pursuit. W. B. Yeats expresses this spirit in the poem “Sailing to Byzantium”, where he asks the holy persons of the Byzantine temples to come out of the wall and bring the gold light to a world that has lost any point of reference. In this sense, the avant-garde art does not seek in Byzantium a return to the past, but a key to the renewal of the European civilization.

Another interesting case of the relationship of apophatism and avant-garde art is the work of Hugo Ball, founder of the Dada movement

(1916). This movement that sought to produce a completely absurd art, free from any reference to reality, is defined by Ball as a primitive balance between construction and negation⁵. But Ball will find the deeper meaning of this movement in Greek Patristic literature, by declaring – among other things– that we must read the Fathers of the Church in order to understand modern art or that the word Dada means that it was called twice by Dionysius Areopagite: D.A.-D.A.⁶. In fact, in 1923 Ball published a comment on the writings of Areopagite under the title: *Byzantine Christianity*.

Similarly to Malevich, Bell claims a “religious function” in avant-garde art, as he mentions in his diary:

If our abstract paintings hung in a church, they would not need to be covered on Good Friday. Abandonment itself has become a painting. No God no person can be seen anymore. And yet could we laugh instead of sinking into sorrow? What does all this mean? May be only one thing, that world has reached a dead end, that it is in a general strike that a global Good Friday has dawned, that in this case, is felt with greater force outside the church than inside it that the liturgical calendar is dissolved and God remains dead on the Cross on Easter Sunday. The well-known words of the philosopher, “God is dead” begin to materialize all around us⁷.

The contemporary interest in apophatism, however, is not claimed only by the field of avant-garde art and contemporary philosophy. In fact, modern Orthodox theology understands apophatism as its epistemological principle. In this sense, apophatism is defined as the refusal to exhaust knowledge in its formulation⁸. This results in the formation of a virtual language, which on the one hand, is existentially related to what it declares, but on the other hand is

5. H. Ball, *La huida del tiempo (un diario): Con el primer manifiesto dadaísta*, trad. Roberto Bravo de la Varga, Editorial Acantilado, Barcelona 2005, p. 13.

6. H. Ball, *La huida del tiempo...*, *op.cit.*, p. 362.

7. H. Ball, *La huida del tiempo...*, *op.cit.*, p. 209 [our translation].

8. Chr. Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίης*, Ikaros Publishing, Athens 2011, p. 32; see also Chr. Yannaras, *Χάιντεγγερο καὶ Ἀρεοπαγίτης, ἡ περὶ ἀπουσίας καὶ ἀγνώσις τοῦ Θεοῦ*, Domos Publications, Athens 2006 and Vl. Lossky, *Teología mística de la Iglesia de Oriente*, Herder, Barcelona 2009.

differentiated from it and will never be able to replace it. This is why, “theological apophatism insists that our linguistic expression must be transcended, and understood only iconologically, so that the signified is never exhausted only in the notional limits of the signifier”⁹.

Christos Yannaras underlines the difference between what we might call *philosophical apophatism* and what we might define as *theological apophatism*. According to Yannaras, the first is formed under the influence of scholastic philosophy and ends up in the nihilism of the 20th century, while the second is delivered throughout Greek patristic literature and flourishes anew in modern Orthodox theology. From this perspective, the Black Square and abstract art represent the absence of God, while the Byzantine icon (and all the means of expression of ecclesiastical liturgy), socializes the personal existence of the Triune God, while at the same time declaring the limits of this knowledge.

2. The Place of Art in the Writings of the Areopagite

We could assume (following Yannaras and other experts) that in our time two interpretations of apophatism have been developed and therefore two positions regarding the relationship of this concept to art¹⁰. Indeed, the question arises whether these two interpretations are mutually exclusive or whether we should not think of them together, even if we recognized their difference. Would it be possible to speak of a theology of art, that differentiates ecclesiastical from secular art, but at the same time ascertains a relationship between them, as it exists between the Church and the world? The first step to answer the above questions is to find out whether and how the relationship between art and apophatism is presented in the main source of this concept, which is the writings of the Areopagite.

9. Chr. Yannaras, *Χάιντεγγερ καὶ Ἀρεοπαγίτης...*, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

10. At this point we clarify that in this study we do not aim to investigate the timing and causes of this differentiation.

The writings of the Areopagite that have survived, consist of five works: *Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων*, *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίου ἱεραρχίας*, *Περὶ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας*, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, and ten letters. In various places the Areopagite mentions a work titled: *Συμβολικὴ θεολογία* (*Symbolic Theology*). In the writings of the Areopagite seven works are mentioned that have not survived, including *Συμβολικὴ θεολογία*, a work that is of particular importance for our subject, since it examines the images, symbols, and the sensible types that express the energy of God in the world¹¹. According to expert scholars, in the context of the writings of the Areopagite, *Συμβολικὴ θεολογία* belongs to a trinity along with a mental theology (*Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων*) and a spiritual theology (*Μυστικὴ θεολογία*)¹². Each of these theologies would be ways to know and talk about God, as they relate to specific human abilities, as sense, reason and spirit, on a rising road and a successive completion (pl. 1).



Pl. 1

In other places, the Areopagite uses the word *symbol*, referring to those biblical expressions which describe God with references to material things, as stone, or to natural forces, such as fire or air or, when human passions such as anger, intoxication, or sorrow are attributed to God. In *Μυστικὴ θεολογία*, the Areopagite wonders whether God is more life and goodness than air and stone, that is, whether what He is, is better

11. See *DN* I, 8; IV, 5; IX, 5 and *CH* XV, 6.

12. See Areopagita, *opera*. Von Balthasar speaks of a “symbolic theology”, an “empirical theology” and a “mystical theology”, see H. U. von Balthasar, “Dionisio”, in: H. U. von Balthasar, *Gloria: una estética teológica*, vol. II. Estilos eclesíasticos: Irineo, Agustín, Dionisio, Alseldo, Buenaventura, Encuentro, Madrid 1986, pp. 143-205.

expressed in concepts than in the natural elements¹³. In this way, *Symbolic theology* has as its object the explanation of the metonyms or metaphors of God, clearly stating that we must transcend such expressions in order to understand the deeper meaning they hide. This transcendence is done through a process of abstraction as the one that a sculptor follows when he extracts the excess material of the form that already existed in the stone¹⁴. In this sense, the symbol would be a preparatory stage on the way to the knowledge of God.

At first sight, art and aesthetic experience in general would be the lower way of knowledge of God, that proceeds through abstractions to mental viewing. In this sense, the Areopagite speaks about «ἀθέων καὶ πολυειδῶν μορφωμάτων»¹⁵, which must be overcome in order to proceed first, to the mental and then to the mystical knowledge of God, which is the ineffable experience of the union with Him¹⁶. The idea that the Holy Scripture possesses a hidden meaning in sensible symbols, already appears in Clement of Alexandria, in Origen, and in Gregory of Nyssa. In this sense, Dionysios uses the word *symbol* with regard to the Holy Scripture. However, the Areopagite also uses this word also with regard to the things and actions that constitute the ecclesiastical liturgy, giving the term *symbol* an unprecedented meaning¹⁷.

In this case, the symbol does not function as a figure of speech, such as the metonyms and the metaphors, nor as an “atheist formation” («ἄθεον μύρφωμα»), as would be the case with the pagan idol. On the contrary, in this second sense, the symbol is an “exact image” («ἀκριβῆς εἰκὼν»), as it is stated in *Περὶ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας*¹⁸, through which we approach the mystical experience¹⁹. It should be noted that most of the appearances of the word *symbol* are found in *Περὶ τῆς*

13. *MTh.* III: «Ἡ οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἐστὶ ζωὴ καὶ ἀγαθότης ἢ ἄηρ καὶ λίθος; Καὶ μᾶλλον οὐ κραιπαλᾶ καὶ οὐ μηνιᾶ ἢ οὐ λέγεται οὐδὲ νοεῖται;».

14. *MTh.* II.

15. *MTh.* I, 2.

16. *MTh.* I, 2.

17. S. Lilla, «Introduzione allo studio dello Ps. Dionigi l'Areopagita», *Augustinianum* 22, 3 (1982), pp. 533-577, here pp. 559-560.

18. *EH* II, 6.

19. *EH* II, 7.

ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας, a work in which the Areopagite examines “the return” to the union of the creation with God. As the Areopagite himself says, the symbol, in the context of the liturgy, has a mystical nature and is the way of expressing mystical theology. This is how he declares it in one of the letters:

Ἄλλως τε καὶ τοῦτο ἐννοῆσαι χρή, τὸ διττὴν εἶναι τὴν τῶν θεολόγων παράδοσιν, τὴν μὲν ἀπόρρητον καὶ μυστικὴν, τὴν δὲ ἐμφανῆ καὶ γνωριμωτέραν, καὶ τὴν μὲν συμβολικὴν καὶ τελεστικὴν, τὴν δὲ φιλόσοφον καὶ ἀποδεικτικὴν· καὶ συμπλέκεται τῷ ῥητῷ τὸ ἄρρητον. Καὶ τὸ μὲν πείθει καὶ καταδεῖται τῶν λεγομένων τὴν ἀλήθειαν, τὸ δὲ δρᾷ καὶ ἐνιδρύει τῷ θεῷ ταῖς ἀδιδάκτοις μυσταγωγίαις²⁰.

From what has been said so far, we could support that three kinds of art are mentioned in the writings of the Areopagite: a pagan or naturalistic art (such as pagan idols), a religious and pedagogical art (such as the metaphors found in the Holy Bible) and a mystical or sacred art produced for the liturgy of the Church. This latter is not an inferior way of knowledge, but a path to union with God, as it is stated in the second chapter of the work *Περὶ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας*:

Εἵρηται τοίνυν ἡμῖν ἱερῶς, ὡς οὗτός ἐστι τῆς καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱεραρχίας σκοπός· ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ἡμῶν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοιώσις τε καὶ ἔνωσις. Ταύτης δέ, ὡς τὰ θεῖα διδάσκει λόγια, ταῖς τῶν σεβασμιωτάτων ἐντολῶν ἀγαπήσει καὶ ἱεουργίαις μόνως τευξόμεθα²¹.

3. Mystic Theology

In his writing *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας* the Areopagite explains in detail each stage of the path of the knowledge of God. The work consists of five chapters. The first, the longest introduces the apophatic method and begins with an invocation of the Holy Trinity, describing also the knowledge of God as walk through a cloud that is on a peak. Below, the

20. *Ep. IX, 1.*

21. *EH II, 1*, See S. Lilla, «Introduzione...», *op.cit.*, p. 559.

Areopagite uses the narrative of the theophany at Sinai²² as a module of apophatic knowledge, taking probably as a basis the narrative by Gregory of Nyssa in the work *Βίος τοῦ Μωϋσέως*. The second chapter begins with an appeal to us to have the experience of Moses and follows a more detailed explanation of the apophatic method, that includes two modes of expression: *affirmation* and *abstraction*. In this chapter the Areopagite introduces the metaphor of the sculptor to explain the abstract mode of expression. The third chapter presents the three types of theology, underlining the supremacy of the abstract mode over the affirmative. In the fourth and fifth chapter examples of apophatic expressions are offered, first in the field of aesthetics and then in the field of mental experience.

In a first reading, we could say that the apophatic method consists of two opposing movements: On the one hand is the *affirmation* that goes descends in the affirmative and on the other hand the *abstraction* that ascends apophatically. This reading has prevailed to a large extent in the western interpretation of the writings of the Areopagite, which has *Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων* as its center. In *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας* however, a third way of expression is presented that breaks the contradiction: *supremacy*. In fact, this is the way of expressing the experience of “the cloud of unknowing” («τοῦ γνόφου τῆς ἀγνοσίας»), through oxymorons and the descriptions of phenomena of synesthesia, such as the silence of the gaze. In this respect, more than an antithetical or dialectical method, the apophatic method resembles rather an interpretative cycle.

Before we proceed to the explanation of the cycle of the apophatic method, let us focus on the narrative of the theophany at Sinai. As it has already been mentioned, what Moses experiences is the model of the knowledge of God. The first that is worth mentioning is the dynamic nature of this process. The knowledge of God is a movement from the known to the unknown, an, initiation²³, something that is experienced and takes place in the field of experience: «οὐ μόνον μαθὼν ἀλλὰ καὶ παθὼν τὰ θεῖα», says the Areopagite himself²⁴. The ascent of Sinai is associated with the divine movement of return and of a purification

22. Ex. 19.

23. MTh. I, 2.

24. DN II, 9.

process of Moses', which corresponds to the way of abstraction. The descent on the other hand is associated with the divine movement of God's progress towards the world and the experience of an illumination, which corresponds to the affirmation or proposal of God's Law to the people. Moses ascends in order to be united with God, has an experience of thearchy, and therefore proceeds, to a state of completion. However, as we are informed by the biblical narrative, Moses does not remain in the holy place, but descends to sanctify the people, as the priest of God.

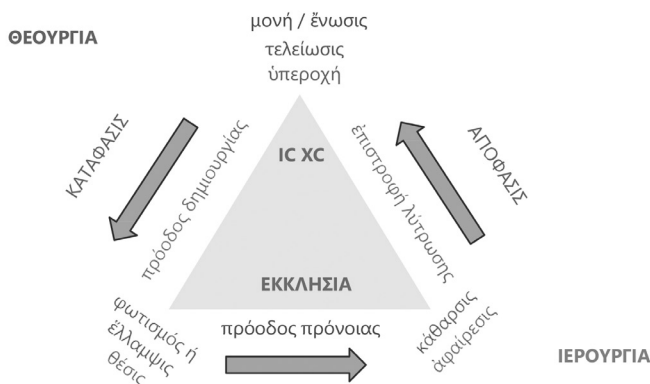
Although in Moses' ascent there is a successive transcendence of the senses and mental abilities, what Moses experiences at the top of Sinai is not an absence, but the supremacy of God, which is consigned and transmitted to man through the Law. In this regard, some scholars have underlined that apophatic knowledge is not just transcendence, but a continuous cycle in which the deification of man takes place according to his abilities²⁵. Regarding this the Areopagite insists: «Αἱ μὲν ὥς νόες νοοῦσι κατὰ τὸ αὐταῖς θεμιτόν, ἡμεῖς δὲ αἰσθηταῖς εἰκόσιν ἐπὶ τὰς θείας ὥς δυνατόν ἀναγόμεθα θεωρίας»²⁶.

In the following plan (pl. 2) we suggest a circular understanding of apophatic gnoseology where each expressive way is related to the various stages of God's knowledge. The words in bold refer to God's energy (or theurgy), Who although He is One, bestows himself through a progress that creates, through a progress that sustains the world, and a redemptive return of creation that results in its union with God. On the other hand, words in ordinary writing describe man's response to God's call, through a ritual that is carried out on three levels: purification, illumination and completion. Finally, words in fainter writing refer to the expressive possibilities in relation to each level, where affirmation and negation should not be interpreted as opposites, but as complementary flows of human speech²⁷. This speech is expressed through positive, abstract and supreme means depending on man's capabilities.

25. H. U. von Balthasar, "Dionisio", op.cit.

26. *EH* I, 2.

27. *MTh.* I, 2.



Pl. 2

At the top of the triangle there is the “cloud of ignorance”, the divine place in which God speaks to Moses, where the union and completion of human existence take place, while the base of the triangle corresponds to the place of the people. This does not mean that only few, like Moses, can know God, but that this knowledge is done successively gradually and proportionately. In fact, Moses himself experiences purification and illumination in his ascent²⁸. As it is underlined in other parts of the writings of the Areopagite²⁹, the place in which this process of knowing God takes place is the Church, whose main mediator is Christ.

As it has been mentioned earlier, affirmation and negation are not opposites, but forces of the same movement which is circular and corresponds to the two movements of God: the progress and the return. Thus, apophatism is not just a positive theology corrected by a negative one. On the contrary, as it is emphasized at the end of *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, the greatest degree of negation is not the denial but the supremacy³⁰.

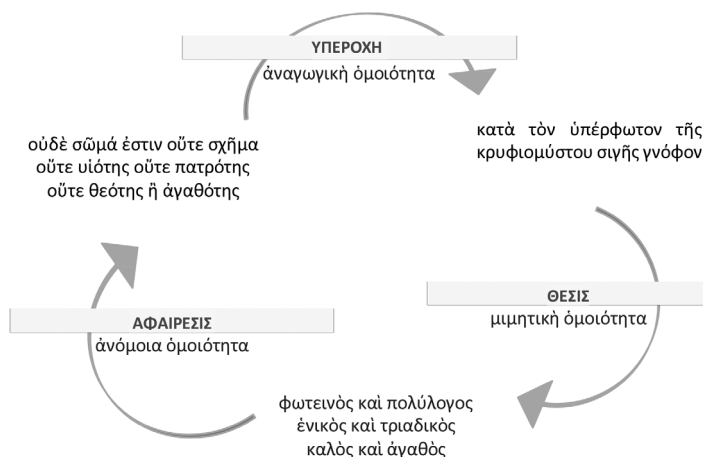
Thus, the apophatic method is carried out by three modes of expression, which in fact the Areopagite uses in *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*: *affirmation*, *abstraction* and *supremacy*.

28. *MTh.* I, 2.

29. *Ep.* III and IV.

30. *MTh.* V.

In the following plan (pl. 3) examples of each mode are presented. Thus, the adjectives “good” («καλός») and “benevolent” («ἀγαθός») or “bright” («φωτεινός») and “talkative” («πολύλογος») are affirmations or additions about God. However, the former are concepts while the latter metaphors and, as a result, the former are closer to abstraction. But the abstraction is fully expressed in negations such as: “cloud of ignorance” («οὐδὲ σῶμά ἐστιν οὔτε σχῆμα»). However, negation is not enough to express the experience of the “cloud of ignorance” («τοῦ γνόφου τῆς ἀγνωσίας»), for which only supremacy is sufficient, as is the expression «κατὰ τὸν ὑπέρφωτον τῆς κρυφιομύστου σιγῆς γνόφον» that begins again the apophatic cycle, since it is about an affirmation or addition.



Pl. 3

It would perhaps be more precise to speak of an apophatic spiral, since the experience of God is a transformation of the world and of man.

Also, each way of expression in the plan 3 is associated with a kind of similarity. Thus, affirmations or additions are expressed imitatively, while abstractions convey a dissimilar similarity and the supremacy provides an elevating similarity. From this classification, we could say that in the writings of the Areopagite there are three kinds of symbols, and consequently three types of art: one imitative or naturalistic, one that aims in fact to reflect God, an abstract one that tries to free the

images of God from the limits of reality, and a supreme one, that seeks to convey «τὰ ἐπὶ τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καταφασκόμενα»³¹ and offer participation in the holy mysteries.

Without any doubt, the liturgical icons of the Church seek to become supreme symbols and for this reason they apply a degree of abstraction, but always maintain at the same time a degree of imitative similarity. But the question arises whether a particular style of ecclesiastical art is more elevating than another, and whether a completely imitative icon is excluded from this function. On the other hand, as we have seen at the beginning, works as the *Black Square* are the epitome of abstraction, to the point of claiming an extreme dissimilarity; however, it intends to become a presence like the liturgical icon. Was abstract art the most elevating expression of God's experience for its time?

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