XV

On Not Knowing Too Much About God

The Apophatic Way of the Neoplatonists and other influences from ancient philosophy which have worked against dogmatic assertion in Christian thinking

Christianity stands out among the three great Abrahamic religions in its willingness to make extremely precise dogmatic statements about God. The Christians who make these statements have generally regarded them as universally and absolutely true, since they are divinely revealed, or divinely guaranteed interpretations of revealed texts. Of course from the beginning there has not been universal agreement (to put it mildly) among Christians about what statements should be so regarded and how they should be worded: and the seriousness with which this need for dogmatic precision has been taken is shown by the way in which the inevitable disputes did not only involve theologians but the general body of Christians, and have led to divisions of churches, long continuing and flourishing mutual hatreds, and an overwhelming amount of theoretical and, where opportunity offered (i.e. where a Church party could get a secular power on its side), practical intolerance.[1] Two areas of Church history which seem to me to provide particularly clear evidence of the incompatible verbal precisions demanded in dogmatic statements and the serious consequences of these demands are the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries and the *Filioque* dispute between East and West (though there is plenty of choice, and others may have other preferences). In both of these, theologians with a real and deep sense of the mystery of God often seem to an outside observer, in spite of their passionate assertions that this is not at all what they are doing and the rhetorical

[1] A grim comment on this, which became more and more manifestly true as the Christian centuries went on, was made very early in the period of Christian dominance by a fair-minded non-Christian observer, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Speaking of the Emperor Julian's advice to Christians of all parties (which he knew very well would not be taken) to live at peace with each other, observing their own beliefs freely, he says 'Julian knew from experience that no wild beasts are such enemies of humanity as most Christians are deadly dangerous (*ferales*) to each other' (Ammianus XXII, 5.4).

reverence of their language, to be arguing as if the God-Man or the Trinity were small finite objects which they had pinned down firmly in their theological laboratories and were examining under the microscope.

The difference in this way between Christianity on the one hand and Judaism and Islam on the other seems to be largely due to the greater influence of Hellenic philosophy on Christian thinking in the discussions which led to the formulation of authoritative statements of Christian doctrine. It is therefore interesting that this philosophy itself has provided Christians with some powerful means of overcoming their extreme addiction to the imposition of precise dogmatic statements as truths about God in which all must believe.

Hellenic philosophers were from the beginning in the habit of making extremely definite statements about everything, including the divine: and it was of course essential to their particular kind of activity that as soon as a statement, especially about something regarded as interesting and important, was made, someone else (or perhaps the same philosopher later, if he was properly self-critical) would challenge it and argue against it, and probably in the end make a counter-statement, which would then itself in due course be countered in its turn: and so on. Philosophy was for them, as it has generally remained since, intrinsically a conversational activity;[2] and, though vigorous attempts have sometimes been made to close the conversation on particular subjects (notably the subject of the divine) they have never, because of the very nature of philosophy, been successful, and philosophical conversations have continued to be obstinately open-ended. Of course, like all conversations, Hellenic philosophical conversation could take a number of different forms. It could be a discussion between friends, civilized, courteous, and moderately fair-minded, as Plato's earlier dialogues are and as the Seventh Platonic Letter says that any philosophical conversation which is to attain its end must be.[3] Or it could be viciously bad-tempered and unfair, as controversy between the different philosophical schools generally was: a horrid example is the anti-Aristotelian polemic of Atticus preserved by the Christian

[2] I prefer to use 'conversation', 'conversational' rather than the more technical and precise-sounding 'dialectic', 'dialectical' because 'dialectic', both in ancient and modern times, has had so many meanings, some of which in the present context would be unduly restrictive or misleading.

[3] Letter VII, 3448, 4–9, 'But by rubbing each of them strenuously against each other, names and definitions and sights and perceptions, testing them out in kindly discussions by the use of questions and answers without jealous ill-will, understanding and intelligence of each reality flashes out, at the highest intensity humanly possible' (trans. A.H.A.).

church historian Eusebius.[4] But very much greater philosophers than Atticus, e.g. Aristotle or Plotinus, are not at their best in inter-school controversy. And there is of course plenty of conversation, of a sort, in the ancient as well as in the modern philosophical world, in which the 'dialogue' consists of a series of monologues in which no speaker pays the slightest attention to what the others have said.

At least a smattering of this sort of conversational and controversial philosophy was part of the education of the Christians in the early centuries of our era who thought out and formulated the authoritative Church statements of Christian doctrine, simply because it was part of the higher education of everyone in the very small minority of the population who received any in the Graeco-Roman world. And, since that education was predominantly rhetorical (the old quarrel between philosophers and rhetoricians was long since over), such philosophy as entered and formed the minds of educated Christians generally tended to do so in a somewhat rhetoricized form: that is, with the issues over-simplified and contrasts sharpened, and any tendencies to agnosticism, tentativeness, and serious attempts to understand opposing points of view minimized.[5] It is easy to understand the effect of this sort of philosophico-rhetorical training of the mind on people like the early Christians who already had a deep religious anxiety about words because the divine relevation in which they believed was given in verbal form, as a body of Scriptures claiming divine authority.[6] By noting that this effect was adverse, I do not at all intend to range myself with the de-Hellenizers in the long controversy about the influence of Greek philosophy on Christianity.[7] I believe this to have been on the whole beneficial, and on many points am more inclined to advocate the re-Hellenization rather than the de-Hellenization of Christianity. But for this very reason I think it important to note adverse effects of philosophy, or of particular philosophies, on Christian teaching and practice when I see them. The attempts to express the essential con-

[4] Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XI, 1–2; XV, 4–9; 12F: Atticus, *Fragments*, ed. E. Des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977).

[5] On philosophy, rhetoric and education in antiquity see I. Hadot, *Arts Liberaux et Philosophie dans la Pensée Antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1984).

[6] Cf. James Hillman, 'On Paranoia', *Eranos* **54** (1985; Frankfurt: Insel, 1987), 269–324.

[7] The works of E. P. Meijering, notably his books on Von Harnack, *Theologische Urteile uber die Dogmengeschichte* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), and *Die Hellenisierung des Christentums im Urteil Adolf Von Harnacks* (Amsterdam, London and New York: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1985), are to be recommended to those unfamiliar with this predominantly Lutheran-inspired controversy. I agree generally with his conclusions.

tents of the Word of God, which may be better understood as poetry and myth, in terms of systematic philosophical definition do seem to me to have played an important part in developing that distinctive ferality which has marked the attitude of most Christians to others who disagree with them till very recently.

But, of course, to describe Hellenic philosophy in this way is to give a very inadequate idea of it. There was a great deal more to it than the disputes of the schools. We should never forget that aspect of it as 'spiritual exercise', as a quest for enlightenment and liberation, a seeking to attain such likeness to the divine as may be possible for humans, to which Pierre and Ilsetraut Hadot have recently called our attention.[8] And this might often be closely connected with the deep sense of diffidence[9] which is apparent at least in some philosophers from the beginning, which expresses itself in a tendency to self-critical examination in which the principal questions are 'How much, if anything, can we really know, especially about the divine? Isn't wisdom the attribute of the gods? Can we humans ever be more than lovers of and seekers after wisdom (*philosophoi*)?' This is particularly evident in Plato, and this is important for our purposes, as it was Platonism in the early centuries of our era (as perhaps it has always been since) which exercised the deepest influence on Christian thought of any kind of Hellenic philosophy. The figure of the Platonic Socrates, with his continual profession of ignorance, became for later generations the paradigm of what a philosopher should be. And the Seventh Platonic Letter, in its philosophical digression (342A–344D) expresses with great force the inadequacy of language in dealing with transcendent realities. (The question of the authorship of this is not relevant to our present purposes. In the period with which we are concerned it was accepted as by Plato, and was a text of great authority for Platonists.) And, whatever Plato himself may have intended, there is a great deal in the Dialogues the reading of which can strengthen this tendency to diffidence and encourage the readers to develop it in various ways. It could also, of course, develop independently of any reading or influence of Plato, as a disposition engendered by philosophical reflection on philosophical

[8] P. Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique*, 2nd edn, revised and extended (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987). I. Hadot, 'The Spiritual Guide', in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, Vol. 15 of *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 436–459. Cf. A. H. Armstrong, *Expectations of Immortality in Late Antiquity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1987), 22–23.

[9] A. H. Armstrong, 'The Hidden and the Open in Hellenic Thought', *Eranos* **54** (1985), 96–99.

encounters, a philosophy, if you like, of philosophical conferences: this was probably the case with Pyrrho.

There are two developments from this original diffidence which, I think, have done something in the past to correct the addiction of Christians to thinking they know and saying much too much about God and may do considerably more in the future, now that the hold of absolute and clear-cut certainties on the minds of religious people is, for a variety of good reasons, steadily weakening and likely to continue to do so in spite of conservative reactions. These are the Apophatic way or Via Negativa of the Neoplatonists and the ancient traditions of Scepticism, the Pyrrhonian and that which developed in Plato's school at Athens, the Academic. The two belong to quite different periods in the history of Hellenic philosophy, the Sceptical to that immediately after Aristotle which it is convenient to call Hellenistic as long as this is not taken to imply too precise a date for its ending, and the Apophatic, which really begins with Plotinus in the third century of our era, to late antiquity. And their main influence on Christian thought has also been exercised at different periods, the Apophatic in patristic and medieval times and the Sceptical from the Renaissance onwards. In view of their common origin in diffidence, their common insistence on the importance of not knowing, and the way in which they can work together harmoniously, in some circumstances, in the minds of religious people, it is tempting to look for some signs of influence of the earlier tendency, the Sceptical, on the later, the Apophatic. But there is little evidence of this, and I do not think that a search for more is likely to get us very far. The dogmatic Platonists of the Roman Empire generally found the sceptical interlude in the history of their school something of an embarrassment, and it seems to me unlikely that Plotinus ever applied his mind seriously to Scepticism in any of its forms, though the possibility cannot be excluded. The following statement by the late Richard Wallis, who before his untimely death had been doing a good deal of research in this area, seems to me to go as far as is reasonably possible in drawing attention to resemblance and suggesting some degree of influence:

> How far Pyrrhonism influenced Neoplatonic views on divine unknowability (as later Scepticism certainly influenced Plotinus on other points) remains uncertain. But at least two of its principles are echoed by the Neoplatonists. First, statements about Ultimate Reality are mere expressions of our own attitude thereto; second, negations used of the Supreme must in turn be negated.[10]

[10] A. Wallis, 'The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing', in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (above n.8) , 465. Wallis's "Scepticism and Neoplatonism", in *Aufsteig und Niedergang der Romischen Welt* (*ANRW*), ed.

This certainly indicates that it is worth while taking Scepticism as well as the negative way of the Neoplatonists into account in considering the desirability of not knowing too much about God, and I shall attempt to do so to some extent. But I shall concentrate attention mainly on the Neoplatonic way. This is in accordance with the original intention of this series of lectures and the limitations of my own competence. It is only from the Renaissance onwards that there is any real evidence of serious influence of the ancient Sceptical traditions on Christian thought (as distinct from the polemical trick, very common in early as in later Christian writers, of using Sceptical arguments from the disagreements of philosophers as sticks to beat other people's dogmas while maintaining an ultra-dogmatic stance themselves: this I do not find very important, interesting, or attractive). This period lies rather outside our terms of reference, and I know just enough about the Christian thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and later on whom Sceptical influence has been detected to know how little I know.

The Negative Way

That way of thinking towards God which is usually referred to as the 'negative' or 'apophatic' way begins as a serious way of thinking which exercised a strong and deep influence on people who were seriously religious, with Plotinus (205–270CE). There had been anticipations of it in the revived dogmatic Platonism and revived Pythagoreanism of the two centuries before Plotinus, and something like it is to be found in the Gnostics of the same period. There are assertions of the absolute unity and supreme transcendence and unknowability of the first principle of

W. Haase and H. Temporini, II 36.2, 912–54, has little to add on Sceptical influence on the negative theology, but does give good reasons for supposing that Plotinus's thought about the divine was influenced at a number of points by Sceptical arguments. David T. Runia, "Naming and Knowing: Themes in Philonic Theology with special reference to the *De mutatione nominum*', in R. van den Broek, T. Baarda and J. Mansfeld (eds), *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 69–91, has a very interesting discussion (iv, 82–89) of Philo's theological use of the rhetorical term *katachresis*, the 'abusive' or 'improper' use of language, in which he cites a somewhat analogous use of the word in Sextus Empiricus (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 207). Though the word *katachresis* is rare in philosophical authors of the first three centuries CE (as Runia notes), and nobody else exploits it theologically as Philo does, the discussion does suggest at least the possibility that there may be some sceptical influence detectable in Plotinus's frequently expressed conviction that all our ways of speaking about the One are improper (particularly evident in VI, 8 (39), 13–18, where he uses the most strongly positive language to be found anywhere in the *Enneads*: cf. also, for the way in which we can use language about the One, VI, 9 (9), 4, 11–14).

reality, sometimes placing it above real being (the Platonic Forms) and/or the divine mind which created the universe. Much of the exegesis of the Dialogues of Plato on which Plotinus relies seems to have originated in this period, notably the fantastic explanation of the second part of the *Parmenides*—probably a complete misunderstanding of the intentions of Plato, but one which proved remarkably fruitful. But what made the apophatic way important for later religious thought was the thinking through again, bringing together and developing of these earlier, rather inchoate, ideas by Plotinus, under the pressure of an intense experience of the presence of that which he knew he could not think or speak of, but had to go on trying to do so to keep the awareness awake in himself and wake it in others so that they could share it. In my attempts to speak about this way in its original Hellenic[11] form I shall rely mainly on Plotinus, though without neglecting the developments and clarifications of his thought which are to be found in the later Hellenic Neoplatonists.

The Neoplatonic Negative Way is often described as a way of thinking about God in which it is considered preferable in speaking about him to say what he is not than what he is. Denial gives a better approach to the divine than affirmation. This is true as far as it goes, but rather over-simplified, and can lead to misunderstandings. To understand it better the first thing we need to do is to distinguish between the underlying experience and the intellectual approach to God which it stimulates, and which helps to establish and strengthen it. (It will probably begin to be noticed here that I am rather carefully avoiding the word 'mystic'; and I do not intend to refer to 'ecstasy'. This is in accordance with Plotinus's own usage[12] and will avoid various entirely inappropriate and misleading associations which the words have nowadays.) It is important, however, not to make the distinction too sharp and not to suppose that the experience and the proper following of the intellectual way can be disjoined. This would be anachronistic and misleading. In the Christian tradition, before the disjunctions and

[11] Instead of the rather silly and in intention derogatory word 'pagan', I prefer to use in this context 'Hellene', 'Hellenic' which were used both by the philosophers and their Christian opponents during the period of conflict between Christianity and the old religion when referring to the adherents of the latter and their beliefs and practices.

[12] The adverb *Mustikōs* is used once in the *Enneads* (III, 6 (25), 19, 26), referring not to anything like 'mystical union' but to the secret symbolism of ordinary Greek mystery-rites: the adjective *Mustikos* and the substantive *Mustēs* do not occur at all. *Ekstasis* may be used once (VI, 9 (9), 11, 23) in the sense of 'being out of oneself' in speaking of union with the One: but here there is a good deal to be said for an emendation of Theiler's which would eliminate the word (see my note ad. loc. in the Loeb Plotinus).

separations of the high Middle Ages, and later, in the West which have led to our being inclined to make very sharp distinctions, first between theology and philosophy, and then between theology and 'spirituality', religious experience and theology went very closely together, as they still do in the Christian East. And for the Hellenes, for whom of course no separation between philosophy and theology was possible, philosophy, and especially that part of it which they called *Theologia*, was always, as has already been said (above p. 132), a 'spiritual exercise', a quest for transforming enlightenment and liberation, a movement towards assimilation to or union with the divine.

The experience which underlies and provides the driving force for the negative way from its beginning and is increasingly realized as it goes on is of course, according to the accounts given of it by those who follow that way in East and West, ineffable, and it is therefore obviously desirable to say as little as possible about it. It would be preferable not to say anything, but it is rather difficult to write a paper about the Negative Way without doing so. Of course it should be made clear at this point that anything I say is second-hand. I do not claim the experience of a true apophatic contemplative like Plotinus, but at most the sort of dim awareness of what he and others are talking about which is necessary for anyone who tries to write or speak about him and which may in fact be quite common: he himself thought that it was universal.[13] What must be said, to avoid a common misunderstanding, is that this growing experience is of something immeasurably positive and that the realization as one follows the negative way to its proper end in the negating of all the negations, that all thought and language is inadequate is immensely liberating and indeed glorifying, because it points on to something that our minds cannot contain. This is why most Neoplatonists[14] retain some positive terms for their goal, above all 'One'

[13] '. . . all men are naturally and spontaneously moved to speak of the god who is in each one of us as one and the same. And if someone did not ask them how this is and want to examine their opinion rationally, this is what they would assume, and with this active and actual in their thinking they would come to rest in this way, somehow supporting themselves on this one and the same, and they would not wish to be cut away from this unity' (VI, 5 (23), 1, 2–8; trans. A. H. Armstrong). It is worth reflecting on the fact that Plotinus regards this as commonplace and generally acceptable. It does something to illustrate the closeness in some ways of Neoplatonic thought to that of India, and the change made by centuries of Christianity in the kind of religious statements we regard as obvious and commonplace, whether we believe them or not.

[14] Iamblichus in the fourth century and Damascius and Simplicius in the sixth separated the absolutely transcendent Ineffable from the One/Good. But Proclus (fifth century), the greatest and most precise systematizer among the

and 'Good', though they know very well how inadequate they are. 'One' indicates for them the impossibility of applying to the First the divisions, distinctions and separations which alone make discursive thought and discourse possible, and 'Good' acts as a kind of direction-finder or signpost, indicating that what we are travelling to along the way is more and better, not less and worse, than anything we can conceive. This preserves that consonance between religious and moral convictions which seems necessary to prevent any religious reflection from becoming perniciously insane.

This emphasis on the positive power of the experience which generates and is strengthened by the negative way leads necessarily to a consideration of the attitude of negative theologians to the positive or Kataphatic theology which makes affirmative statements about God. This cannot be one of simple exclusion or rejection, for two reasons. The first is that if one is following a way of negation one has to have something solid to negate: a negative theology needs a positive theology to wrestle with and transcend. And if the negation is to be done properly, one has to understand what one is trying to negate: and 'understand' here must be taken in a serious sense, as involving a great deal of hard study and intellectual effort, and some respect for and good will towards the people who make the positive statement one is trying to negate. This of course applies to negations in general, whether one is following the way of negative theology or not. A really good negation cannot be just polemical or journalistic.[15] The second reason, perhaps, goes rather deeper. The great negative theologians, from Plotinus onwards, are always aware as they follow the negative way that in the end they must negate their negations:[16] if not, they will arrive in the end at an empty space neatly fenced by negative dogmas, which is not at all

[15] Cf. Mary Midgley, 'Sneer Tactics', *Guardian* (Wednesday, 7 October 1977): an excellent comment on negation by flippant dismissal.

[16] There is a good account of the negation of negations at the end of the part of the *Commentary on the Parmenides* of Proclus which survives only in Latin:

> Parmenides, then, is imitating this and ends by doing away both with the negations and with the whole argument, because he wants to conclude the discourse about the One with the inexpressible. For the term of the progress towards it has to be a halt; of the upward movement, rest; of the arguments that it is inexpressible and of all knowledge, unification. . . . For by means of a negation Parmenides has removed all negations. With silence he concludes the contemplation of the One (*Plato Latinus* III, trans. Anscombe and Labowsky (London: Warburg Institute, 1953), 76–77).

Hellenic Neoplatonists, does not find this necessary: and Plotinus, I believe, would have thought that it showed an insufficient understanding of the odd, flexible, paradoxical, detached use of language which becomes necessary at this level.

where they want to be. So if the negative theologian finds himself becoming captivated by his negations he will immediately negate them vigorously while continuing to bear them in mind and keep them in balance and tension with the positive statements he is impelled to imply in negating them. (At this point one can see how close negative theology can come to ancient Scepticism, as Wallis noted (above p. 133): though I still think the two should be distinguished.) These reasons account for the vast amount of positive theology which is to be found in the works of the great negative theologians, Hellenic and Christian.

What has just been said leads, I think, naturally to a consideration of a kind of description of the Neoplatonic way often used, especially by Christian theologians, as an 'intellectual' or 'philosophical' way. (This is usually intended to be derogatory: 'merely' is either explicitly said or implied.) This is true in a sense, but requires some explanation and qualification. It is true in the sense that those who follow the negative way of Plotinus know that they can only get beyond thought by thinking with the highest possible degree of intensity and concentration through a long course of critical and self-critical reflection and argument. (In the later Hellenic Neoplatonists the position is complicated by their acceptance of a 'theurgic' way deemed to be in some sense superior to the philosophical. But when they follow the philosophical way this still remains true of them.) But what I said earlier about ancient philosophy as spiritual exercise, and the closeness of the way and the underlying experience, should indicate that one has to broaden the meaning of 'intellectual' considerably and use 'philosophical' in a wide and loose way of which a good many present-day philosophers would not approve. Very hard thinking is certainly going on, but it is by some standards decidedly peculiar thinking. One should never in reading Plotinus forget that the experience is primary and that it is apprehended by him and the other Neoplatonists as something given, light from above, voices from on high, a power given in our nature by the Good as our source which impels or lifts us to the Good as our goal. And we go the way it drives and use what it puts in our way, poetry and myth and symbol and paradox as well as straightforward argument.

There is another limitation on the intellectualism of the Hellenic and traditional Christian, Jewish and Muslim Neoplatonists which must also be taken into account. The positive theologies with which they wrestle and which they seek to transcend are of course the theologies of their own traditions, and they take them as they find them. And the intellectual world in which Neoplatonism developed and passed to Christian thinkers was strongly traditionalist in the sense that the authority of whatever one regarded as the authentic tradition was absolute.[17] This remains true even of a thinker as original and indepen-

[17] Cf. A. H. Armstrong, 'Pagan and Christian Traditionalism in the First

dent-minded as Plotinus. He does not think it right to disagree knowingly with Plato. Of course ancient methods of exegesis, as illustrated by the Fathers of the Church expounding the Scriptures or Proclus expounding Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, made it much easier to combine traditionalism with considerable freedom of thought. But the intellectual limitation remained, and did a good deal to hamper some possible developments of the negative way. Its influence was real, powerful, and widespread in the Christian patristic and medieval tradition. It is by no means confined to the Dionysian writings and those influenced by them in East and West. It can be observed in the fourth-century Greek Fathers and in predominantly kataphatic thinkers of the West, most notably Augustine and Aquinas. But it does not affect their theology as pervasively as might be expected. It does not make them more tentative about traditional dogmas, or even their own expositions of them, or more tolerant of dogmatic disagreement. (The same is true of Proclus and other late Hellenic Neoplatonists.) I shall return to this briefly in my conclusion.

The attitude of those who follow the way of negation to the external observances of religion, to sacred rites and sacraments and images, can be a good deal more positive than is sometimes supposed. Plotinus himself had little personal use for or interest in them, and perhaps most apophatic contemplatives become more and more independent of them as they advance on the negative way. But he had no objection to his closest associate Amelius being much concerned with external observances, as long as he himself was not required to take part in them.[18] He recognizes their sacredness and value for the vast majority of human beings who need them, and his occasional references to them in the *Enneads* are always respectful. And at least once he shows himself as ready as his pupil, the great anti-Christian controversialist Porphyry, to defend the whole Hellenic inheritance of cult and myth against the growing assaults of Christianity.[19] He is no more detachable from or

[18] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 10, 33–37. On the significance of this story in the context of what we are told in the *Life* about the position of Amelius in the group see A. H. Armstrong, 'Iamblichus and Egypt', *Les Etudes Philosophiques* **2–3** (1987) 182–183 and 188, [this volume, study II].

[19] *Enneads* II, 9 (33), *Against the Gnostics*, 9: the key sentence is 1.35–39. 'It is not contracting the divine into one but showing it in that multiplicity in which God himself has shown it, which is proper to those who know the power of God, inasmuch as, abiding who he is, he makes many gods, all depending upon himself and existing through him and from him' (trans. A.H.A.). I have tried to bring out the full significance of this in 'Plotinus and Christianity', to be published in a volume of essays in honour of Edouard des Places.

Three Centuries A.D.', in *Studia Patristica* **XV**, No. 1, E. A. Livingstone (ed.) (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 414–431, [this volume, study IX].

hostile to his Hellenic religious environment than most great Christian contemplatives who have followed the negative way have been from the rites and sacraments of their churches. And the later Hellenic Neoplatonists, in the period of increasingly intolerant Christian domination, were passionate and committed defenders of their whole religious inheritance against the new religion.

This seems to lead naturally to a consideration of another characteristic often attributed to the negative way, to some extent rightly, its interiority, One does indeed advance on the way indicated by Plotinus by an intense introspection. One must seek the principle and goal of one's existence, the Good, within oneself. But Plotinus, who very well knows the inadequacy of all such spatial metaphors, prefers to speak of each lower stage which one passes through on the quest as within the higher, so that Soul and its work, the material cosmos, are in the Divine Intellect and Intellect is in the Good. The Good is immediately present at every level, containing and pervading them all, so that the apprehension of it is always not only of it as discovered in, beyond and containing the self but as in, beyond and containing all things, imparting to them, each in their degree, such reality as they have. The supreme moment of union is indeed one of extreme interiority and complete unawareness of self and all else. But this is rare and attained by few. And because of this intimate and immediate presence of the Good in and containing all things, the heightened awareness of it given by the ultimate experience or such communication of it as is possible makes those who have undergone it, or had it fruitfully communicated to them, more aware of this supreme divine presence not only within themselves but in all external and material things, which makes them each and every one theophanies or icons, and as such holy and lovable. It is a constantly recurring experience of those who study Plotinus that he teaches us to love the world: not in a way which makes us want to possess or exploit the things in it, which would be contrary to the whole spirit of Hellenic philosophy, and also, I believe, of authentic traditional Christianity, but in contemplative enjoyment of the light of the Good shining in and on its beauty. This 'iconic' awareness and understanding of the world is one of the most powerful and pervasive legacies of Neoplatonism to the Christian world, apparent in its art and poetry as much as, or more than, its theology and spiritual teaching.

Ancient Scepticism

I shall now try to say something about the ancient Sceptical traditions and the kind of influence they can exercise on religious thinking. This will be very brief for reasons already indicated, and mainly directed to showing both the differences between Sceptical religious thought and

the Negative Way and the possibility, in some circumstances, of their working harmoniously together to mitigate dogmatic fanaticism. I shall concentrate on trying to present Scepticism as an attitude or temper of mind rather than on discussing the details of, and differences between the more highly organized, systematic and coherent forms of Sceptical thinking, the Academic Scepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades and the Neo-Pyrrhonism inaugurated by Aenesidemus.[20] It would of course be absurd and contrary to the intentions of the ancient Sceptics to present any form of Scepticism as a system, or even a collection, of anti-dogmatic dogmas supported by conclusive arguments: for Sceptics all arguments, including their own, are inconclusive: the investigation must always be pursued further. And there may be a subsidiary reason for presenting Scepticism in the way which I have chosen. In spite of the extent to which the Neo-Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus was read and used by Christian thinkers in the Renaissance, I am inclined to think that the most pervasive Sceptical influence in the Christian West has been that of the rather weak and watery Scepticism (as it appeared to his contemporaries and to later connoisseurs of the Scepticality of Scepticisms) of Philo of Larissa, as transmitted by the very widely read and influential Cicero. And this urbane, tentative Philonian or Ciceronian Academic Scepticism certainly transmitted itself as an attitude or temper of mind rather than as the tidy parcel of knock-down arguments so efficiently provided by Sextus Empiricus.

The most important thing to understand about ancient Sceptics and those in later times who have been influenced by them is that they do try to remain genuinely open-minded. Their suspense of judgment is real, and does not conceal a negative certainty. This should be remembered when considering Sceptical views on religion and influence on religious thought. When confronted with a metaphysical or religious dogma (as with any other kind) they do not simply deny or reject it: they enquire into it as long as there are any questions to be asked, but at no stage deny that there is something to enquire into (though they do not, of course, affirm this either). If they are Pyrrhonians they may pursue the enquiry only sufficiently far to rest in inconclusiveness and so ensure their own tranquillity. If they are Academics, who really enjoy arguments and are not particularly interested in tranquillity, they will pursue the enquiry indefinitely. In practical, every-day religious life this Sceptical temper is a strong defence against the fanaticism which is so easily bred by

[20] The precise study of ancient Scepticisms from Pyrrho to Aenesidemus has now been made very much easier by the admirable source-book recently produced by A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Their documentation and discussion of the varieties of Scepticism is particularly full, exact and illuminating.

dogmatic certainty. It will often, especially in its more Pyrrhonian forms, tend to conformism. In Christian terms, the Pyrrhonian will tend to be a conservative churchgoer who does not actually believe anything, or, quite often nowadays, a conservative non-churchgoer who thinks that the services which he does not attend should remain in all respects unchanged. This conformism is what the ancient Pyrrhonians explicitly recommend.[21] But Academics who follow Carneades in regarding probability as an adequate guide in everyday life and are capable of enthusiasm may find it quite compatible with strong support for radical reform and even revolutionary change in religious matters.[22]

The main reason for introducing Scepticism into this paper was that it can provide an alternative means to the Negative Way by which Christians can avoid the temptation to know too much about God. It seems therefore important for clarity to distinguish the ways in which they can affect the religious mind. The Negative Way is a very passionate business. It is the awareness of a supremely powerful and attractive presence which drives one on to go beyond the limited statements of dogmatic theology to that which cannot be thought or spoken. Sceptics have their own passions and their own sense of enlightenment and liberation, but these are different from those of the Negative Way. Pyrrho intensely desired, and probably attained, that liberation and peace of mind which comes from the dismissal from the mind of theoretical conclusions (not of course in favour of practical conclusions but in favour of not arriving at any conclusions at all). The Academics had a passion for argument for its own sake, and delighted in showing their skill, as Carneades did so well, by arguing excellently on both sides of a question, thereby satisfying themselves and demonstrating to others that all the arguments anyone can think of are inconclusive and the matter requires further investigation and discussion, so that they can pursue their favourite occupation indefinitely. All Sceptics operate entirely on the level of discursive reason, which the followers of the Negative Way are trying to get beyond. But these are well aware that they must continually be active on this, as on all, levels. So they may find the Sceptics and their arguments a great help in dealing with those who would set up dogmatic blocks to their further progress. And the

[21] Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* II, 2. 'In the way of ordinary life we affirm undogmatically that the gods exist and we give them honour and affirm that they exercise providence but against the headlong rashness of the dogmatists we have this to say': . . . there follows a very full statement of the reasons which make it impossible to be certain that anything is the case about the gods.

[22] There is a good statement of the difference indicated here, of course from the Neo-Pyrrhonian point of view, in Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 228–231.

Sceptics, if they are true Sceptics in the ancient Greek style, though they may not share the faith of the followers of the Negative Way, may be open to it if it comes to them because they have no dogmatic blocks. They may help each other to provide some corrective to Christian dogmatic fanaticism, though how effective this will be will depend very much on the religious circumstances of the place and time and the character of the prevailing kataphatic dogmatism, which the Sceptics need in order to criticize it as much as the followers of the Negative Way need it to wrestle with and transcend.

How far in fact did the two tendencies ever work together after the full development of the Negative Way by Plotinus in the third century? There does seem to be one way of thinking in which it may be possible to detect the influence of both, though I would not be too dogmatic about the Sceptical side. This is the tolerant pluralism of the Hellenic intellectual opposition to the new Christian domination in the fourth century, so well expressed by Symmachus (who certainly read Cicero) and Themistius (an independent-minded philosopher-orator, of predominantly Aristotelian tendency, who might well have known something of the Sceptics).[23] This, however, is hardly relevant to our main subject, as it was furiously rejected by the leaders of Christian thought at the time, and the rejection was maintained throughout the centuries of Christian domination, as it still is by conservative theologians. It is tempting at first sight to see some Sceptical influence in a way of Christian thinking very much more germane to our main concern, the idea of Eriugena, powerfully developed by Cusanus, that our knowledge of God never attains more than the *Verisimile*, is always *Coniectura*.[24] This, however, I think would be a mistake. It is historically most unlikely, and the development can be adequately accounted for by that deep Platonic and pre-Platonic diffidence about the possibility of adequate and expressible knowledge of the divine about which I spoke earlier (p. 132), which is still powerfully apparent in Plotinus. This is of course the starting-point of the Negative Way, of which Eriugena is one of the greatest Western Christian exponents. Its development by Nicholas of Cusa is worth noting, as his influence on the Christian Platonism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was considerable, and it is here that we can see the strong beginnings of an effective

[23] Symmachus, *Relatio* III, 10; Themistius, *Oration* 5, and the summaries of his lost speech on tolerance before the Emperor Valens in the church historians (Socrates IV, 32, and Sozomen VI, 6–7): cf. Henry Chadwick, *'Gewissen'*, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* **X** (1978), viii d, col. 1101–1102; A. H. Armstrong, 'The Way and the Ways', *Vigiliae Christianae* **33** (1984), 8–11.

[24] W. Beierwaltes, 'Eriugena und Cusanus', in *Eriugena Redivivus* (Heidelberg: O. Winter, 1987), 328–338.

tentativeness about our knowledge of God, effective in the sense that awareness that 'truth is bigger than our minds', that God is beyond our knowledge, is leading, in a way new in the history of dominant Christianity, to the belief that we should be less dogmatic about our own dogmas and more tolerant and kindly to those who disagree with them. We should, however, observe that negative theology is very much in the background in Renaissance Christian Platonism, when it is there at all, especially in England. The Cambridge Platonists are very uneasy with radical negations.[25] Their admirable tolerance was more directly inspired by a moderate, subtle and flexible Scepticism which seems to derive from the Ciceronian–Philonian Scepticism of which I spoke earlier (p. 141).[26]

On the whole it seems that in the earlier period of Christian history, down to and including the Reformation, the Negative Way, though often powerfully present and with a strong influence on the spirituality and thought of individuals, was always kept very much under control and rather in the background. Apophatic theology was very much dominated by Kataphatic, with which, as I have said, its relationship can never be simply hostile or dismissive. The reasons for this are various.[27] But perhaps the most important is that Christian thought throughout this period was traditionalist in the sense which I indicated above (pp. 138–9) and traditionalist in a particularly rigid, exclusive and authoritarian way. It was only when it began to be considered permissible to disagree with the sacred authorities, the Church and the Bible, that the full possibilities of the Negative Way could develop, and in particular that what Jean Trouillard[28] called the 'critical value of

[25] R. Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I.4.36, 558. Cudworth was consciously opposed to Scepticism and to the tolerant pluralism of the fourth-century Hellenes: cf. I.4.26, 434–433 and 446–447. The weakening of dogmatic absolutism, especially among the clergy, had not gone very far in his time. There is, however, much more positive attitude to Scepticism in Benjamin Whichcote's *Select Notions (Aphorisms)* I.7.

[26] Cf. Margaret L. Wiley, *The Subtle Knot* (London: Unwin, 1952; reprinted New York: Greenwood Press, 1968); *Creative Sceptics* (London: Unwin, 1966).

[27] I have attempted to suggest and illustrate some of them in a contribution, 'Apophatic-Kataphatic Tensions in Religious Thought from the Third to the Sixth Centuries A.D.', to a volume of essays to be published in honour of John O'Meara.

[28] J. Trouillard, 'Valeur critique de la mystique Plotinienne', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* **59** (August 1961), 431–434. Trouillard has influenced my personal understanding of the *Via Negativa* greatly; my memorial tribute to him is in 'The Hidden and the Open in Hellenic Thought', *Eranos* **54** (1987), 101–106, [this volume, study V].

mysticism' could become manifest. Before that, it might mitigate dogmatic fanaticism by continually leading those who follow it on to a God beyond the dogmas, but it remained compatible with a rigid dogmatism because it took the kataphatic theology which it wrestled with and sought to transcend at its own valuation as the one exclusively true statement at the level of discourse and definition of what had been divinely revealed. The undermining and eventual overthrow of this sort of kataphatic absolutism, in so far as it has been undermined and overthrown, as for many of us it irrevocably has, in recent times, has been due not so much to the following of the Negative Way as to disciplines and ways of thinking which derive from that Hellenic tendency to continual critical questioning which found its clearest theoretical formulations in ancient Scepticism. It is for this reason that in our present situation, when more and more even of those who retain a deep and strong religious faith feel that they know less and less about God, it has seemed to me important to distinguish the parts played by the Negative Way of the Neoplatonists and the ways of the Sceptics in leading towards a salutary and liberating ignorance in which faith rests on the Unknowable and is nourished by silence.