## Knowing God

The qualities that God possesses, that is, the characteristics that comprise His nature, are conventionally termed His “attributes.” Before we investigate God’s attributes, however, it is imperative to delineate the relationship between God’s “essence” and His “attributes.” This will require us to examine the contrast between the so-called apophatic and cataphatic approaches to knowing God.

### А. Apophatism: The Unknowable God

**1. Survey of the Concept**

The term “apophatism” refers to approaching the knowledge of God by means of negation. Let us explain. It is thought that God is so great and unfathomable that humans cannot conceive Him or describe Him in words. This is not only due merely to human weakness, but God, by nature, is beyond description, even by the angels.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, adherents to this school of thought feel that we should not attempt to describe what God is, but only what He is not. This is description by means of negation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Apophatism characterizes Eastern Orthodox theology, where it finds it firmest supporters. Orthodox scholar and Metropolitan Ilarion, for example, writes, “Apophatism consists in denial of all that God is not…. We cannot speak of what God is, but only of what He is not.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky concurs, “We cannot comprehend what God is, but only what He is not.”[[4]](#footnote-4) So then, the only way we can describe God is by using terms prefixed by “non,” “without,” or “beyond.” For example, God is nonvisible, without limit, beyond comprehension. We even encounter descriptions like “beyond good,” and “beyond being.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Apophatism contrasts with a rival approach to knowing God called “cataphatism.” Cataphatism involves describing God by means of affirmation.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this approach, one may employ common terms to describe God’s essence or character, such as “good,” “great,” or “holy.”

Adherents of apophatism object that describing God by affirmation limits His glory. Since God is above all and beyond all comparison, one cannot make affirmations about God, but only negations.[[7]](#footnote-7) We cannot define God, but only state how He differs from others. Here, however, Orthodoxy makes an important qualification – the titles “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” faithfully reflect the essence of the Godhead. Hopko claims that God is “beyond being,” but not “beyond hypostasis.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

We must note that among supporters of apophatic theology, we can identify both extreme and more moderate positions. Among the latter group was John of Damascus (675-749), who ascribed to God both affirmations and negations:

Uncreate, without beginning, immortal, infinite, eternal, immaterial, good, creative, just, enlightening, immutable, passionless, uncircumscribed, immeasurable, unlimited, undefined, unseen, unthinkable, wanting in nothing, being His own rule and authority, all-ruling, life-giving, omnipotent, of infinite power, containing and maintaining the universe and making provision forall: all these and such like attributes the Deity possesses by nature (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.14).

Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), while acknowledging that God is unfathomable, nonetheless urges believers to utilize the knowledge of God they possess:

But some one will say, If the Divine substance is incomprehensible, why then dost thou discourse of these things? So then, because I cannot drink up all the river, am I not even to take in moderation what is expedient for me? Because with eyes so constituted as mine I cannot take in all the sun, am I not even to look upon him enough to satisfy my wants? Or again, because I have entered into a great garden, and cannot eat all the supply of fruits, wouldst thou have me go away altogether hungry? (*Catechetical Lectures*, 6.5).

On the other hand, the fifth-sixth century thinker, Pseudo-Dionysius (the “Areopagite”), held to a more radical form of apophatism:

Unit making one every unit, and superessential essence and mind inconceivable, and Word unutterable… namelessness being after the manner of no existing being, and Cause of being to all, but Itself not being, as beyond every essence (*On the Divine Names*, 1.1).[[9]](#footnote-9)

We especially note the extremism of Pseudo-Dionysius in speaking of God as a being beyond being. Bloesch claims that Pseudo-Dionysius even taught that God, in His essence, is beyond even the hypostatic distinctions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another extreme adherent of apophatism was Gregory Palamas (1296-1359):

God’s nature, which is beyond nature, can neither be expressed in words, nor captured in thought or vision, because it is distinct from all things and unknowable…. There is no name, neither in this age, nor in the future, to assign to it. There are no words, discovered by the soul or expressed by the tongue, nothing in the feelings or beyond feelings, no image, that are able to somehow characterize it, except for complete unfathomability, which we confess.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Pelikan notes that according to Palamas, even negation was insufficient to describe God.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is also interesting to note the presence and permeation of apophatism in Russian philosophy.[[13]](#footnote-13) Its influence is especially felt in the works of Aleksei Losev (1892-1988), whose thought has affinity with Neoplatonism. Losev believed in an Absolute Unity, the nature of which is indescribable. In this “Absolute” existed a distinction between its “essence” and its “energies,” something also seen in apophatism (see below). Only by means of the latter could one gain some conception of the Absolute. We can also mention Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), who also believed in an Absolute Unity, the essence of which could not be conceived.

Western theology also flirted with apophatism, especially among liberal thinkers. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), for example, taught that the way to know God was not through the mind, but by direct contact with the Ultimate. According to Otto, a God that one may know is not the true God.[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, Karl Barth (1886-1968) taught that God is so transcendent, that people cannot know Him or contact Him except when God Himself takes initiative to personally reveal Himself to an individual. Barth expresses his view in the phrase, “Through God alone may God be known.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

A contemporary of Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, shared Barth’s view of God’s unknowability. According to Bultmann, God “stands over and against the material order.” Bultmann stressed “the great distance between God and humanity.” He stated, “God is so great that we cannot know him or speak of him sensibly at all.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Finally, Paul Tillich, who defines God as the “Ground of Being,” believed that God goes deeper than being, and therefore cannot be described. He spoke of the “abyss of the Godhead.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The concept of “God’s uncreated energies” plays a key role in the system of apophatism. The terms “energies,” “powers” or “activities” are used to describe how God manifests Himself in creation. God’s “energies” are how He presents Himself to the created world. People cannot know God’s “essence.” It is unfathomable and indescribable. Yet, they can know and describe God’s “energies.” Such cataphatic depictions of God as “good,” “holy,” or “wise” relate to God’s energies, rather than to His essence. The “fullness of Deity,” spoken of in Colossians 2:9, is thought to be the sum of God’s energies along with His unknowable essence.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Some Church Fathers speak of the supposed distinction between God’s essence and His energies. Especially notable for this is Pseudo-Dionysius, who claims that God, in His unity or essential nature, abides in absolute rest and does not reveal Himself to the external world, whereas God, in his distinctions or energies, expresses and manifests Himself to creation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Gregory Palamas made the most significant contribution to the development of this dual understanding of God. In his day, certain theologians objected to the pretention of monks (hesychasts) that they enjoyed direct contact with God in spirit, since God, in His essence, is unapproachable.[[20]](#footnote-20) Palamas offered the following solution. The monks were not experiencing mystical union with God in His essence, but rather in His energies. Lossky comments, “We see that the necessity of dogmatically substantiating the possibility of union with God forced the Eastern Church to formulate the teaching of a real distinction between divine essence and energies.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Lossky, in fact, is considered the leading modern Orthodox thinker promoting the idea of God’s uncreated energies. He feels that God’s energies “eternally emanate from the united essence of the Most Holy Trinity.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Furthermore, “We can say that (God’s) energies give us a glimpse of the Most Holy Trinity apart from Its unapproachable essence.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Nonetheless, making a distinction between God’s essence and energies is not meant to imply a bifurcation in His nature. Lossky writes, “Totally unfathomable in His essence, God fully reveals Himself in His energies, which does not lead to a division of His nature into two parts – knowable and unknowable – but indicates two various modes of the Divine being – in His essence, and apart from His essence.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Moreover, “God shows Himself as He really is. We cannot know the depths of the Divine essence, but we know the radiance of glory, that God truly is, whether we name this the Divine ‘essence,’ since it is inexhaustible transcendence, or whether we name this ‘energy,’ since it manifests itself in glory. It is always the self-same nature.”[[25]](#footnote-25) So then, God’s uncreated energies are not “part” of God, but God Himself. His energies are “God Himself, yet not in His essence.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Palamas affirms the same – energies are not emanations from God, they are “Divine life, which God imparts to His creatures. Thanks to these energies, God makes direct and immediate contact with humans…. They are essentially God Himself in His action toward and revelation to the world.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Metropolitan Kallistos (the former Timothy Ware) agrees that God’s “energies” are essentially God Himself and describes them as God in action, God in self-disclosure, and God in immediate fellowship with His creatures.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Lossky hesitates to equate God’s uncreated energies with His “attributes.” Following Palalmas, Lossky prefers to associate God’s energies with His “names,” like Wisdom, Life, Power, Justice, Love, Being, God, etc. The names that describe God’s energies are innumerable: “God’s names, as well as His energies, are innumerable, but the nature, which they reveal, remains nameless, incomprehensible.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Yet, these names refer only to God’s energies, not to His essence: “When we say that God is Wisdom, Life, Truth, Love, we speak of His energies… of His manifestations, which are external to the Triune existence itself.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

To what degree does apophatism claim that God’s energies correspond to His essence? There seems to be some inconsistency in this regard. At times, adherents of apophatism deny the gaining of any insight into the nature of the essence from the energies. Lossky, for example, claims that God’s names “reveal to us His energies, which descend to us, but do not provide access to His unapproachable essence,” and, ”we may say that energies reveal to us a certain image of the Most Holy Trinity’s existence apart from Its unapproachable essence.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Basil the Great affirms likewise, “The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach” (*Letter* 234).

On the other hand, the following quotes suggest that God’s essence is in some way revealed in His energies. For example, John of Damascus, who writes emphatically about God’s incomprehensibility, nonetheless claims, “All that we can affirm concerning God does not shew forth God’s nature, but only the qualities of His nature.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Note that John claims that God’s energies show “the qualities of His nature.” Moreover, Archimandrite Nikon (Ivanov) comments on the teaching of Basil the Great, “We acknowledge the essence in virtue of the energy, which demonstrate and explain the essence.”[[33]](#footnote-33) In addition, in his analysis of the theology of Palamas, Mantzaridis regards God’s uncreated energies as “the natural expression of the divine essence.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Even Lossky is ready to attribute to God’s energies a certain association with His essence:

The most exalted names, even the name “love,” expresses the Divine essence, but not exhaustively. These are the attributes, the qualities, by which the Godhead communicates Himself…. His nature can never be exhausted, can never be objectified in our sight.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The teaching of God’s uncreated energies interacts with the doctrine of the Trinity as well. In Orthodox thought, the Son is eternally begotten by the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from Him. This occurs on the level of God’s essence, not His energies. However, when God creates, this occurs in connection with His energies, not His essence. So then, it is thought that distinguishing essence and energies can prevent the misunderstandings that the Father created the Son and Spirit, or that creation is some sort of emanation from His essence.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Finally, it is thought that distinguishing God’s energies and essence corresponds to the two approaches we have discussed for knowing God. Cataphatic theology corresponds to God’s energies, while apophatic theology relates to God’s essence.[[37]](#footnote-37) Pseudo-Dionysius distinguishes these two methods of describing God as follows:

The (Names) then, common to the whole Deity, as we have demonstrated from the Oracles, by many instances in the Theological Outlines, are the Super-Good, the Super-God, the Super-essential, the Super-Living, the Super-Wise, and whatever else belongs to the superlative abstraction; with which also, all those denoting Cause, the Good, the Beautiful, the Being, the Life-producing, the Wise, and whatever Names are given to the Cause of all Good, from His goodly gifts (*On the Divine Names*, 2.3).[[38]](#footnote-38)

**2. The Apophatic Method**

Supporters of apophatism do not totally reject the cataphatic approach to knowing God, that is, by employing reason. For them, cataphatism may serve as a launching point for more substantial contemplation of God.[[39]](#footnote-39) However, they deem the cataphatic approach less fruitful than the apophatic. Gregory Nazianzen states, “To speak of God is a great thing, but better yet is to purify oneself for God.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Therefore, it is not totally improper to ascribe to God such predicates as loving, wise, true, holy, or good, but in so doing practitioners of apophatism recognize that these terms do not relate to God’s essence, but to His energies or manifestations. In Lossky’s opinion, cataphatism relates to God’s *catabasis* (condescension) to people, i.е., that which He reveals about Himself. Apophatism, though, makes possible people’s *anabasis* (ascension) to God through *gnosis* (mystical knowledge).[[41]](#footnote-41)

In order to go deeper into the knowledge of God, adherents of the apophatic method suggest embarking on the path to “ignorance.” Those who wish to embrace apophatism must “cleanse” the mind. This means that one must cease making affirmations about God or even thinking of Him in those terms. The God-seeker must cease to think of God as loving, wise, true, holy, good, etc. The seventh century monk, Maximus the Confessor, emphasized clearing the mind – “its being bared of any thought, of all mental images in general.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Lossky, appealing to the fourth century Father, Gregory of Nyssa, in support, states that the purifying of the mind involves elimination of “all positive attributes of the object it wishes to attain, in order to culminate finally in a kind of apprehension by supreme ignorance of Him who cannot be an object of knowledge.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Lossky also appeals to the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius:

One must renounce both senses and rational effort, and from all sensory and rational objects; both from all that has existence, and from all that does not have existence; in order that in total ignorance to attain to union with the One, Who exceeds all existence and all knowledge.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Lossky himself claims,

Only by means of ignorance can one know the One, Who is higher than all possible objects of knowledge…. By embracing negation, we ascend from a lower level of existence to its highpoint, progressively putting aside everything that can be known, so that in the darkness of total ignorance we may approach the Unknowable.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Moreover,

Apophatism teaches us to see in the dogmas of the Church, first of all, their negative meaning, not allowing our thinking to follow its natural course and form concepts which would replace the spiritual reality. Christianity is not a philosophical school speculating about abstract concepts, but, first and foremost, fellowship with the living God.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Even reflection on Scripture is inadequate. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) taught that in reflection on Scripture – the verbal expression of revelation – God Himself remains concealed as if behind a wall.[[47]](#footnote-47) According to Lossky, one’s dismissal of cataphatic conceptions of God should reach the following goal: “As we attain the summit of contemplation… we say ‘God is nonexistent,’ ‘God is not good’.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Moreover, “The most exalted attributes are excluded: goodness, love, wisdom. Finally, existence itself is excluded…. He ‘is not’.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

The next step in the apophatic approach to knowing God is to seek mystical union with Him. The goal of this experience is for the individual to experience God’s energies within the heart. This leads to a state of ecstasy.[[50]](#footnote-50) Florovsky describes this experience: “The way to knowledge is the path of abstraction and negation, the path of simplicity and silence…. We only know God in the rest of the spirit, in the rest of ignorance. God is not known from a distance through reflection on Him, but through an incomprehensible union with Him.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

Furthermore, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, persons must “deprive themselves of feeling and intellectual activity… so that in ignorance to attain union (with God).” He enters into “the gloom” in order to see the “Divine Rays.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Berzonsky affirms, “We come to know the Unknowable One not by thinking or by understanding but by progressive union.”[[53]](#footnote-53) According to Maximus the Confessor, “The knowledge of God in His higher existence is possible; yet not by rational concepts, but in a vision that exceeds thought, in *ecstasy*,” which requires “complete silence.” Moreover, our minds can “soar in the ever-peaceful darkness of Divine Mystery, where it meets God face to face and lives in him.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Metropolitan Ilarion also supports this idea: «...one can commune with God not as much through words and description, as through pious and fearful silence.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Pseudo-Dionysius adds, “The most profound knowledge of God is that which is attained through ignorance, by means of a union that exceeds reason.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Finally, Orthodox scholar Andrew Kuraev compares the cataphatic method, employed by Protestant theology, with apophatism: “Orthodoxy and Protestantism correlate as a religion of monks and a religion of professors.” Kuraev, then, feels that the former is devoted to contemplation of God, and the latter – to His study.[[57]](#footnote-57)

As stated earlier, adherents of apophatism do not totally spurn cataphatism, since it can serve as a starting point for moving on to a deeper knowledge of God. Maximus the Confession, in fact, counsels believers to seek union with God progressively, beginning with the cataphatic approach: “First of all, it is possible and necessary to cognize God ‘from the magnitude of his deeds.’ This is still preliminary knowledge. And the limit and goal of knowledge of God is to see God.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Eastern monks/mystics often employ a special method to attain mystical union with God called the “Jesus prayer,” championed by hesychastic monks and especially by Gregory Palamas. According to this method, a monk/mystic should continually repeat the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me; Son of God, have mercy on me.”[[59]](#footnote-59) The “Jesus prayer” arose in the Sinai monastery and was further developed by monks on Mount Athos in Greece. Palamas zealously supported and promoted the practice.

Palamas also advanced the idea that through apophatic contemplation the worshipper can see the so-called “Tabor Light,” that is, the light that surrounded the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration. To support this idea, Palamas appeals to similar occurrences in Scripture, such as Moses’ face shining, Stephen’s vision of Christ, and Paul’s experience with Christ on the Damascus road.[[60]](#footnote-60) Mantzaridis comments, “The hesychast monks of Mount Athos, in practicing pure prayer, progressed toward the vision of divine light.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Although in Scripture, “light” merely *represents* God, Palamas claims that the symbol (i.e., light) somehow actually *participates* in what it symbolizes (i.e., God). Therefore, the Tabor Light is not simply a manifestation of God’s glory, but an appearance of God Himself – not in His essence, but in his uncreated energies.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The following citations from Pseudo-Dionysius summarize the apophatic approach:

But thou, O dear Timothy, by thy persistent commerce with the mystic visions, leave behind both sensible perceptions and intellectual efforts, and all objects of sense and intelligence, and all things not being and being, and be raised aloft unknowingly to the union, as far as attainable, with Him Who is above every essence and knowledge. For by the resistless and absolute ecstasy in all purity, from thyself and all, thou wilt be carried on high, to the superessential ray of the Divine darkness, when-thou hast cast away all, and become free from all (*Mystic Theology*, 1.1).[[63]](#footnote-63)

And there is, further, the most Divine Knowledge of Almighty God, which is known, through not knowing (agnosia) during the union above mind; when the mind, having stood apart from all existing things, then having dismissed also itself, has been made one with the super-luminous rays, thence and there being illuminated by the unsearchable depth of wisdom (*On the Divine Names*, 7.3).[[64]](#footnote-64)

**3. Support of and Objections to Apophatism**

What evidence supports the validity of the apophatic method?[[65]](#footnote-65) First, adherents appeal to the occasion when Moses ascended Mount Sinai in a dark cloud while the other Israelites remained at the foot of the mountain. The latter are associated with those seeking God by the cataphatic method. The follower of apophatism, however, like Moses, abandons the cataphatic way in order to know God more deeply in the “divine gloom.” In other words, one must embark on the path of ignorance.[[66]](#footnote-66) Pseudo-Dionysius explains,

For even the divine Moses is himself strictly bidden to be first purified, and then to be separated from those who are not so, and after entire cleansing hears the many-voiced trumpets, and sees many lights, shedding pure and streaming rays; then he is separated from the multitude, and with the chosen priests goes first to the summit of the divine ascents, although even then he does not meet with Almighty God Himself, but views not Him (for He is viewless) but the place where He is (*Mystic Theology*, 1.3).[[67]](#footnote-67)

However, one must consider that here we are not dealing with a didactic (teaching) passage of Scripture, but narrative. This passage does not *teach* apophatism, but simply *describes* Moses’ experience on Sinai. We must refrain from basing an entire doctrinal position on a creative interpretation of biblical narrative. Such commentators are employing an allegorical approach to biblical interpretation. What actual facts can substantiate that Moses’ ascent on Sinai represents the preferred method of knowing God? We must also keep in mind that such an interpretation runs contrary to clear biblical teaching on that topic in other, didactic passages (examples to follow).

In addition, advocates of apophatism fail to appreciate that when Moses ascended on Mount Sinai, supposedly to enjoy an apophatic experience in God’s presence, the Lord gave him instead the clearest cataphatic description of His nature found anywhere in Scripture. We read in Exodus 34:5-7,

Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Yahweh. Then Yahweh passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

Additionally, in support of their theory, apophatic devotees point to the fact that God did not allow Moses to look at His face, but only at His back (Ex 33:20-23). Assumedly, God’s “face” refers to His essence, while His “back” refers to His energies. However, does this view have any substantiation? We agree that no one can see God in all His glory. Yet, this passage does not teach a distinction between essence and energies in God. The passage, in fact, does not concern *knowing* God, but rather *seeing* Him. The fact that no one can see God’s face in no way forces the conclusion that no one can know God’s essence or describe Him in human words. Visual perception of God differs from mental comprehension of His attributes.

Apophatism makes a similar claim about John 1:18: “No one has seen God at any time” and 1 Timothy 6:16: “(God) dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” Yet again, the topic is not a verbal revelation about God, but the visual perception of His glory. The impossibility of the latter does not imply the unfeasibility of the former. In fact, in both contexts we see emphasized the necessity and importance of revelation from God. After the above quoted section of John 1:18, the verse continues, “The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has *explained* {Him.}.” Similarly, 1 Timothy 6:16 is located in a context where Paul exhorts Timothy to “keep the commandment without stain or reproach,” i.e., preserve God’s verbal revelation.

A further argument in support of apophatism is found in the words of Solomon, “Yahweh has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud” (1 Kin 8:12). Whenever God’s glory appeared in the tabernacle or the temple, it was always in the form of a cloud (Lev 16:2; 1 Kin 8:11; Ex 40:34-35). This is consistent with the idea that no one can see God in all His glory (cf. Ex 33:20). However, this in no way implies that the knowledge of God is not available in conceptual form. In fact, the “glory cloud” overshadowed the ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments, that is, a written record of God’s revelation.

Furthermore, followers of apophatism cite Deuteronomy 29:29, which allegedly speaks of God’s unknowability as His “secret things”: “The secret things belong to Yahweh our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” The term “secret,” though, is a translation of the Hebrew participle סָתַר (*satar*) in the *Niph’al* form, meaning “hidden.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This word is not used in Scripture to describe some ineffable object, but for something that is understandable, but hidden. Therefore, this verse is simply contrasting things that God has revealed with things He has not. It does not refer to God’s essence.

Next, apophatism claims that God cannot be “contained” (see 1 Kin 8:27). This verse refers to the fact that no building can contain God, and it is further claimed that neither the human mind, nor the biblical text can contain Him either. We concur that God is bigger than any building, the human mind, and even the Bible. However, God is also bigger than the human heart and any mystical experience a person may claim. Therefore, devotees of apophatism cannot prove that they receive a fuller experience of God through a mystical experience than that which comes through Scripture.

Adherents of apophatism also appeal to Psalm 97:2, where we read, “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him.” However, the Scriptures often represent God as a phenomenon of nature, such as an earthquake (Ps 18:7; Judg 5:4) or a storm (Ps 18:11-15; 104:7; 50:3).[[69]](#footnote-69) Both elements, in fact, are present in Psalm 97:

Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of Yahweh, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth (Ps 97:2-5).

Such a phenomenon was seen when God visited Mount Sinai:

So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who {were} in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai {was} all in smoke because Yahweh descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently (Ex 19:16-18).

In the following chapter, Moses explains why God appears in such a terrifying form. His goal is not to emphasize His unknowability, but to instill fear in His people:

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw {it,} they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin” (Ex 20:18-20).

Also in support of apophatism, we read that God’s thoughts are greater than people’s thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). Apophatists conclude that it is better to know God with the heart than with the mind. Yet again, this verse is being taken out of context. We note that Isa 55:8 begins with the conjunction “for,” which connects it with the previous verse in a causal relationship. Verse 7 reads, “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to Yahweh, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” So then, there is no need to abandon one’s intellect or reason, but rather one’s depraved manner of thinking and acting. Furthermore, God addresses the issue of people’s wrong thinking not by urging a mystical encounter, but by sending His Word (vv. 10-11). Correspondingly, He invites His people to “incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live” (Isa 55:3).

Other arguments are advanced in support of the apophatic approach. The Old Testament records that Elijah did not find God in the strong wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in a still, small voice (1 Kin 19:13). It is assumed, then, that the knowledge of God comes in the stillness of the human spirit. In response, we note the parallel between Elijah and Moses.[[70]](#footnote-70) Both fasted forty days, both came to Sinai, and both encountered the Lord there. The signs that Elijah observed Moses saw as well, namely fire and earthquake. Finally, both Elijah and Moses were in need of a confirmation of their ministry before the people.

However, unlike Moses’ experience, Elijah did not find God in the fire or the earthquake. God confirmed Moses’ ministry with a demonstration of His power and might. In Elijah’s case, who desired a similar divine confirmation, God revealed Himself in a quiet fashion. House proposes that in Elijah’s time, God intended to reveal Himself in a more subtle manner – by a still, small voice – since God’s plan at that time was to bring correction to Israel in a less dramatic way: “Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place” (1 Kin 19:15-16).[[71]](#footnote-71)

When Paul was caught up to heaven, he heard “inexpressible (ἄρρητος - *arretos*) words, which a man is not permitted (ἔξεστιν - *exestin*) to speak” (2 Cor 12:2-4). Does this imply that people are incapable of expressing God’s essence? First, we must consider that the topic of these “inexpressible words” is not stated. Apophatists cannot prove that they concerned God’s ineffable essence.

Second, the above translation (taken from the NASB) correctly translates the negated verb ἔξεστιν (*exestin*) in its most common sense as “not permitted.”[[72]](#footnote-72) The term as ἄρρητος (*arretos*) is commonly translated not only “inexpressible,” but also “forbidden.”[[73]](#footnote-73) We would prefer the latter translation, since if words are “inexpressible,” then what sense is there in “not permitting” them to be spoken? In addition, one would expect stylistic harmony between the two clauses, which is achieved if both speak of restriction.[[74]](#footnote-74) The preferred translation, then, is “forbidden words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

Third, here we have another example where God does not allow certain truths, which can be understood, to be revealed at that time (as noted in Deuteronomy 29:29 and Revelation 10:4). So then, the words that Paul heard were understandable, but he was forbidden to announce them.

Some say that 1 Cor 2:12-13 teaches the mystical approach to knowing God: “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual {thoughts} with spiritual {words}.” The issue here, however, is not whether God reveals Himself in words, but *in what way* Paul received this verbal revelation. It came not through human reasoning, but by supernatural illumination. What Paul received, nonetheless, was verbal communication.

The following logical argument is advanced in support of apophatic theology – knowledge gained through personal encounter is superior to knowledge as information. In other words, it is better to become personally acquainted with someone than to simply read about that person. On the other hand, these two paths to knowledge in no way exclude one another. Studying about someone does not hinder one from knowing that person, but rather enhances personal relationship. The more we know about someone, the better we know that individual. McGrath writes, “Revelation includes knowledge of God as an ‘It’ and as a ‘You.’ We come to know things about God; yet we also come to know God.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

This same response applies to the apophatist’s claim that worship of God is more important that studying about Him. Unlike study, worship is a matter of the heart, not the mind. Yet again, the two practices in no way conflict, but compliment one another. The study of God does not hinder worship, but enhances it and enriches the worship experience.

Finally, Maximus the Confessor makes the following claim. He feels that Scripture serves only to relay God’s salvation plan, but it does not aid in knowing God. Scripture itself, he claims, supports the apophatic approach. He writes,

Reflect on what has been assigned to you, even the terms and names that were used about God in Scripture, although true, had to be regarded as inappropriate and in this sense “unworthy” of him. But this recognition of this unworthiness was itself derived from the revelation of God in Scripture, so that the true fidelity to Scripture did not consist in claiming that its language was a disclosure of the inner being of God but in recognizing that it spoke about the saving will of God toward the world. For that very reason, the mind had the obligation to pay careful attention to the revelation of his saving will.[[77]](#footnote-77)

In response, one only needs to observe that none of the arguments discussed above in support of the apophatic method enjoy clear biblical support. On what basis, then, can Maximus claim that Scripture itself promotes apophatism?

**4. Further Refutation of Apophatism**

Along with our objections to apophatism raised in the previous section, we may uncover other weaknesses in this system. First, we admit, of course, that God is incomprehensible. No matter how much effort we exert, we are not able with human intellect to fully comprehend him, or with human words to express His glory. God is greater than all we can think or say. Scripture confirms this:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the lord, or who became his counselor? Or who has first given to him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him {be} the glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33-36).

However, it is misguided to conclude that God’s incomprehensibility requires us to abandon the knowledge of Him available through His self-revelation, or to seek Him exclusively by means of mystical encounter. The Bible, in fact, repeatedly calls believers to seek God through study of the Word (see Josh 1:8; Ps 1:1-3; Ps 119; Prov 4:20-22; Matt 4:4; Col 3:16; Acts 20:32; 1 Pet 2:2).

Unlike the claims of apophatists, Scripture nowhere indicates that the cataphatistic method is ineffective or insufficient. Russian evangelical scholar Yevgeny Zaitsev rightly comments, “It is impossible to deny that the biblical narrative in general demonstrates a cataphatic character.”[[78]](#footnote-78) He also states, “Although mystical experience is present in the Bible (Job 42:5; 2 Cor 12:2-4), it is never spoken of as a dominant practice or as the ultimate goal of a believer’s spiritual walk.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

The theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) will greatly aid us in our understanding of how we know God. Acknowledging that our knowledge of God is partial, he nonetheless asserted that we can truly know Him. He affirms that our knowledge of God is *analogical*, that is, we can understand God’s general characteristics, but only to the degree that the human mind can comprehend them. For example, we know that God is good, and that this word accurately describes His nature or essence. What we do not know is *how* good He is. His goodness is infinite and exceeds our ability to understand it fully. Yet, we do understand the sense of the word “good,” and that word truly describes God.

It may prove helpful to compare the following terms used to compare items. The Latin term *univoce* refers to an exact description that perfectly corresponds to the item being described. We do not claim to have such a knowledge of God, since He is infinite and incomprehensible. The Latin term *aequivoce* is used when the description of an object does not correspond to the object at all. This term is also inappropriate in relation to our knowledge of God. Aquinas felt the most appropriate term to describe how we know God is *analogice,* i.е., by analogy.

So then, we know the Lord partially, analogically, but not fully.[[80]](#footnote-80) Although our knowledge is partial, it is nonetheless true. Joyner writes, “Whatever knowledge we have of God is because He has chosen to disclose himself to us. But even the admittedly limited knowledge we now have is glorious to behold and is a sufficient ground for our faith.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Bloesch adds, “The God of the Bible in incomparable but not unthinkable. He is incomprehensible but not unintelligible.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Pink wisely counsels, “Because we are unable to acquire perfect knowledge, it would be folly to say we will therefore make no efforts to attain to *any* degree of it.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

Contrary to the claims of apophatism, we affirm that the descriptions of God in the Bible correspond to His essence, not to His so-called “energies.” The Bible nowhere teaches or supports the distinction between essence and energies in God, except in some allegorically interpreted passages noted earlier. The Bible describes God as He truly is in Himself. Scripture says, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16) and, “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5). It does not say that He “manifests” Himself as love and light, but that He is so in His nature. These terms, along with others, truly describe who God is. In Bloesch’s words, “The essence of God is reflected in his attributes; the attributes, on the other hand, are manifestations of his essence.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Erickson concurs, “God is his essence, he is his attributes, the predicates that attach to him. When we know the attributes of God, we are truly knowing him.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

Distinguishing essence and energies in God creates a contradiction with John’s claims about Christ. He writes about the Lord, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him}” (Jn 1:18). Jesus revealed the “invisible God,” that is, God Himself, not merely His energies. Therefore, John can write, “We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father (Jn 1:14), and Jesus could say of Himself, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

It is curious to note that distinguishing essence and manifestations in God characterizes non-Christian mysticism as well. The well-known Jewish philosopher Maimonides, along with other Jewish and Moslem mystics, so taught.[[86]](#footnote-86) It seems that this view is rooted in general mystical thought, rather in Holy Scripture.

Moreover, apophatism undervalues God’s ability to reveal Himself. Admittedly, human rationality cannot fully comprehend God’s glory. Yet, that does not mean that God cannot expresses *Himself* or describe *Himself* by means of human language. If God is indeed great, which apophatism certainly affirms, then He is more than able to reveal Himself in words. The limitations of language do not prevent Him from giving an accurate description of Himself. God created language, in fact, to facilitate communication with His creatures. If *people* attempt to describe God in words, their attempts may fall short in precision or be altogether inaccurate. However, if God describes *Himself* by means of language, we will receive an accurate and precise revelation of His nature.

Interestingly, we discover that the most ardent supporter of apophatism, Pseudo-Dionysius (Aeropagite), is unreliable as a source of true teaching. He claims to be the convert of Paul in Athens, as recorded in Acts 17:34, and for many years his followers considered the author of these mystical works to be the true Athenian. However, scholars have convincingly demonstrated that this author lived in the sixth century (see discussion in Appendix A). We hold any pseudonymic author to be, in essence, a deceiver and disqualify him as a teacher of truth.

We should also note the striking resemblance between the apophatic method and Hindu practice. In particular, the features of the “Jesus prayer” closely correspond to Hindu meditation: control of breathing, meditative contemplation, prescribed body posture, and endless repetition of a set prayer (or “mantra”).[[87]](#footnote-87)

Finally, many parallels exist between apophatic theology and Neoplatonism. Lossky himself notes this: “This method (i.e., apophatism) is utilized by practitioners of Neoplatonism and Hinduism.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Zaitsev concurs, “We must note that apophatic theology, although it has a long history in Christian tradition,… originated in Greek philosophy,”[[89]](#footnote-89) and, apophatic theology “traces its roots to the mysticism of Origen and Greek philosophy, and found its classical expression in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

In addition, Meyendorff writes about Dionysius, “He, along with the Neoplatonists, follows apophatic theology: God is unknowable, incomprehensible, and cannot be defined by affirmations.”[[91]](#footnote-91) Thus, one may consider apophatism to be an incarnation of Neoplatonism in Christian garb. To further investigate Neoplatonism and its effect on apophatic practice in the Church, refer to Appendix A.

A significant conflict arises when we view the existence of God’s “energies” in light of the doctrine of the “simplicity” of God’s nature. Traditional Christian theology considers that God is “simple” in the sense that He is not made up of parts. It is improper to divide His nature. Yet, if God exists in “modes,” i.e., His essence and His energies, then His nature ceases to be “simple.” We affirm, of course, that God exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but His triuneness does not relate to His general nature, but to the intra-trinitarian relationships between the Persons.

Gregory Palamas defended apophatism against this charge by saying that since God does not obtain qualities from sources outside of Himself, His nature remains “simple.”[[92]](#footnote-92) Yet, Palamas’ response is unconvincing, because the question at hand is not God’s independence from others, but His own intrinsic nature.

Basil the Great discusses this question in Letter 234 and concludes, “The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.” Here Basil attempts to limit God’s “simplicity” to His essence alone. However, according to apophatic theology, God’s energies are not separate from Him, but a mode of His existence. Therefore, Basil cannot limit “simplicity” to God’s essence without denying that God actually exists in His energies as well.

In conclusion, the apophatic method does not correspond to biblical truth and, consequently, is an inappropriate and unprofitable approach to the knowledge of God.

### B. Key Terms and Concepts in Knowing God

In this section, we will define terms commonly used in the study of God’s nature. At times, as we shall see, the biblical usage of these terms differs from how they are used in theological discussion.

Our first item is the term οὐσία (*ousia*). In the New Testament, the word οὐσία (*ousia*) is found only once (Lk 15:12-13) where it simply means “possessions.” In Greek philosophy, however, the word refers to an impersonal, all-encompassing, all-pervasive, all-penetrating power – Reason. As a result, in patristic theology the term became associated with God’s nature or essence.

Next, we will discuss the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*), which is usually employed by theologians to designate the separate Persons in the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three “hypostases” in the triune God. The basic meaning of the term, though, is that which stands under something else, that is, its foundation.[[93]](#footnote-93) Based on that observation, then, the word has a closer association with the *essence* of something than to distinctions within it. The biblical usage reflects this feature as well. In the New Testament, it carries the meaning “realization” (Heb 11:1) or “confidence” (2 Cor 9:4; 2 Cor 11:17; Heb 3:14). It directly connotes God’s essence in Hebrews 1:3: “(Christ) is the radiance of (the Father’s) glory and the exact representation of His nature (ὑποστάσις).

Stoics, though, assigned a different definition to the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*) – a concrete manifestation of the all-encompassing οὐσία (*ousia*) in a certain person or thing.[[94]](#footnote-94) Patristic theology embraced this meaning and applied it to the Persons of the Godhead.

The New Testament word “nature” is most commonly a translation of the Greek φύσις (*phusis*). In the New Testament, this word is typically associated with a natural physical condition or function, as seen in the following examples:

- Rom 1:26 – For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function (φύσις) for that which is unnatural.

- Rom 2:27 – And he who is physically (φύσις) uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter {of the Law} and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

- Rom 11:21 – For if God did not spare the natural (φύσις) branches, He will not spare you, either.

- Rom 11:24 – For if you were cut off from what is by nature (φύσις) a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural {branches} be grafted into their own olive tree?

- 1 Cor 11:14 – Does not even nature (φύσις) itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

- Gal 2:15 – We {are} Jews by nature (φύσις) and not sinners from among the Gentiles.

- 2 Pet 2:12 – But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct (φύσις) to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed.

Therefore, φύσις (*phusis*) is the sum of the qualities that make up the nature or essence of something. For example, in Galatians 4:8, when Paul says, “You were slaves to those which by nature (φύσις) are no gods,” he means that idols do not have all the necessary character traits to be classified as “gods.” Similarly, in James 3:7, James describes the animal world and humanity with the word φύσις (*phusis*): “For every species (φύσις) of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race (φύσις).” Again, this word indicates classification by characteristics.

Let us define more exactly the term “attribute.” It refers to qualities or characteristics of someone or something. The entire sum of attributes makes up the nature of the entity. Attributes differ from accidents (pronounced “assendents,” which we will discuss later) in that the former are necessary for qualifying something for its proper classification according to nature. In other words, if a certain entity is missing any one of the attributes that are necessary characteristics of a species, then it cannot be considered a member of that class, since its nature differs from others in that class. In respect to God, Nash writes, “A divine attribute is an essential property of God…. A divine attribute is a property which God could not lose and continue to be God.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

The term “accidents” refers to concrete aspects of an object as well, but unlike attributes, they are not necessary qualities of a thing or person’s nature. In other words, if a certain accident, present in all other members of a class, is missing in the object under study, that does not prevent its inclusion in the given class if all necessary attributes are present.[[96]](#footnote-96) For example, one of the attributes of human nature is the human will. If an entity does not have this feature, it is not human. Humans, though, have various hair colors, which is an accident, since a certain hair color is not a necessary quality for humans.

Another integral part of our discussion is the difference between nominalism and realism. Nominalism means that we ascribe to God certain attributes, but God, in reality, has no specific attributes. We simply assign them to God for the sake of convenience.[[97]](#footnote-97) The Lutheran theologian Francis Piper claims that God speaks of His attributes solely for our sake.[[98]](#footnote-98) According to this theory, God’s nature is “simple” in the sense of “indivisible.” Therefore, it is preferable to speak of God as a whole being, not as a combination of attributes.[[99]](#footnote-99) The theory of nominalism has some common features with apophatism since both systems hesitate to speak of attributes in God. In distinction from apophatism, though, nominalism does not divide God into separate “modes,” namely, essence and energies.

In refutation of nominalism, we can say that God’s Word itself informs us of His attributes. Contrary to Piper, the Scriptures nowhere hint that God does this purely for our benefit. Additionally, if we may not distinguish, for example, God’s power from His knowledge and establish conceptual borders between them, then they may merge to the point where power is no longer power, and knowledge is no longer knowledge. That which God knows, He knows. This is His knowledge. That which God does, He does. This is a manifestation of His power. Knowledge and power are different aspects of His nature, and we must perceive them in distinction from one another.

What about realism? Here it is claimed that God truly possesses specific attributes. Additionally, God’s nature can actually be divided among His attributes. For example, we can say that God, let us say, is 10% wisdom, 30% love, 15% power, etc. The combination of all His attributes, both in quality and quantity, makes up His nature. According to realism, higher order entities are more complex than lower ones, that is, they possess more attributes. Since God possesses the most and highest attributes, He is the greatest Being of all. In realism, we may view God’s attributes as various parts of His being, and it is permissible to divide His nature by His attributes.[[100]](#footnote-100)

On the other hand, if we are able to divide God’s nature by His attributes, then it follows that each of His attributes has a limit. If each attribute makes us a certain “percent” of God’s nature, then they are limited, that is, finite. The Bible, though, speak of God’s attributes as infinite. If God Himself in infinite, then His attributes must be as well.

Additionally, such a view can lead to polytheism. If God’s nature can be divided by His attributes, then the potential exists for the independent existence of these attributes. The result is many gods. This likely occurred among the peoples of antiquity, who acknowledged, for example, a god of love, a god of war, a god of reproduction, a god of wisdom, etc.[[101]](#footnote-101)

The biblical position is well expressed by several evangelical theologians. Millard Erickson, for example, rightly claims, “God is an integrated person,” i.e., it is improper and even impossible to divide His nature by attributes – it is “simple.”[[102]](#footnote-102) On the other hand, in order to preserve the integrity of God’s revelation and prevent a confusion of His attributes with one another, we must speak of specific attributes in God. Although we cannot *divide* God’s nature, we can *distinguish* definite qualities in it.

In order to avoid the errors connected with realism, one must insist that God’s attributes can have no independent existence outside of Himself, but exist only within His integrated nature. His attributes do not act as an outside force to limit Him or define His behavior, but simple describe what God’s character is like. Tozer writes in this regard, “All God’s reasons for doing anything lie inside of God. They do not lie outside of God to be brought to bear on Him.”[[103]](#footnote-103) So then, God’s nature is the sum of His attributes, yet, unlike realism, each of God’s attributes is just as infinite as He is.

Other evangelical thinkers share this view.[[104]](#footnote-104) Shedd defines divine attributes as “the Divine essence, whole and entire, contemplated in a particular mode of external operation.”[[105]](#footnote-105) Shedd also claims, “We must not conceive of the essence as existing by itself, and prior to the attributes, and of the attributes as an addition to it. God is not essence and attributes, but in attributes.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Erickson also affirms that God’s nature consists in His attributes: “When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Tozer summarizes well the evangelical position: “The mercy of God is simply God being merciful. And the justice of God is simply God being just.”[[108]](#footnote-108) Within God’s nature, there exists no conflict between His attributes: “God always acts in conformity with the fullness of His own wholly perfect, symmetrical nature.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

### C. Classification of God’s Attributes

It is useful to classify God’s attributes in some sort of overarching structure that will provide us with clarity of thought about His nature. Might not such a structure, though, distort the biblical picture of God? Chafer emphasizes the importance of this issue when he writes, “An omission or slighting of any of these (attributes), or any disproportionate emphasis upon any one of them cannot but lead to fundamental error of immeasurable magnitude.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Therefore, this step must be taken carefully.

One method for discovering God’s attributes is the “philosophical approach.”[[111]](#footnote-111) According to this method, we define God’s attributes by means of the following. *Via negationis,* i.е., “the way of negation,” eliminates from God’s nature all the imperfections we observe in the world. For example, since death is an imperfection, God must be free of death, or immortal and eternal. Next, the *via eminentice*, i.е., “the way of culmination,” elevates good qualities to the maximum and ascribes them to God. For example, love is an admirable quality. Therefore, God must be perfect love. Finally is the *via causalitatis*, i.е., “the way of causation.” Here we ascribe to God those qualities that are necessary to explain the phenomena of nature. Accordingly, God must be almighty to create and sustain the universe.

A competing approach for discovering God’s attributes in the “revelational approach.” Here we discover who God is by examining His self-revelation in Scripture. The Bible becomes the standard for our knowledge of God and His nature.[[112]](#footnote-112) Since God is the best source of information about Himself, we will operate on this principle.

After identifying God’s attributes in Scripture, how should we classify them? Various systems are proposed: immanent vs. emanent attributes, communicable vs. incommunicable attributes, positive vs. negative attributes, natural vs. moral attributes, and essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes.[[113]](#footnote-113)

We will begin by examining immanent vs. emanent attributes. Immanent attributes are those that are unique to God and independent in their manifestation from creation. They describe who God is in relation to Himself. If creation never existed, God would still display these qualities. Here we may list such characteristics as God’s eternal nature, His omniscience, and others. Emanent attributes are those that God manifests in His relation to creation. [[114]](#footnote-114) We assume that if creation never occurred, then God would not have opportunity to express these qualities. Here we find such items as mercy, faithfulness, and others.

Another system divides God’s attributes into communicable and incommunicable. Communicable attributes are those that people can acquire (at least in part) as well. They would include such characteristics as holiness, love and similar traits. Incommunicable attributes, then, only God can manifest. We can include here omniscience, omnipotence, immutability etc.[[115]](#footnote-115)

Others employ the categories of positive and negative attributes. In this classification system, positive attributes are traits actually existing in God. For example, God is almighty, loving, faithful, etc. Negative attributes are imperfections that God does not possess, such as His eternal nature (not subject to time), His immutability (not subject to change), and His infinite nature (not subject to any limitation).[[116]](#footnote-116)

Another system, a tripartite one, employs the followings groups: essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes. The first group relates to God’s essential being, the second – to His intellectual abilities, and the third – to actions of His will. God’s eternal nature would appear in the first category, His wisdom in the second, and His omnipotence and righteousness in the third.[[117]](#footnote-117)

A very popular approach is to divide divine attributes by the categories of natural and moral. The latter concern exemplary moral behavior, like holiness, love, righteousness and the like. Natural attributes are features that do not concern behavior such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc. Millard Erickson proposes a similar system, yet employs these categories: God’s greatness and God’s goodness. God’s greatness corresponds to God’s “natural” attributes, and God’s goodness – to His moral attributes.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Although Erickson’s approach has much in its favor, a slight adjustment can improve its quality. The classification “God’s goodness” does not recognize the distinction between aspects of God’s character that relate to His holiness, and those that relate to His love. We would propose, then dividing this category in two parts.

Therefore, in this volume we will employ three categories for classifying God’s attributes: God’s greatness (i.e., His “natural” qualities), His holiness, and His love. Such a system corresponds to the three instances where the apostle John uses the formula: “God is…”: “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24), “God is light” (1 Jn 1:5), and “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). “God is spirit” reminds us of His natural, non-moral traits, “God is light” – His holiness, and “God is love” – His mercy and grace.

## Neoplatonism

### А. Description

Neoplatonism was the most influential worldview in the ancient world. It had a significant effect on the theology of many early Church Fathers and, through them, continues to form the thought of certain branches of Christendom today.

The founder of this system of thought was the Alexandrian native Ammonius Saccas (175-240 A.D.). Alexandria was a famous meeting point between East and West. One could find there, as the historian Copleston notes, “Hellenistic philosophy, special science and Oriental religion.”[[119]](#footnote-119) Therefore, it comes as no surprise that we discover in Neoplatonism elements of both Greek philosophy and Hindu faith. The Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky also observes the parallels between Neoplatonism and Hinduism: “’Neoplatonism’ leads to a ‘mystical plunge’ that in some ways reminds one of the teaching of Hinduism.”[[120]](#footnote-120)

Neoplatonism is an offshoot of two philosophies that preceded it: Neopythagoreanism and Middle Platonism. Neopythagoreanism arose in Alexandria in the first century B.C. and contains elements of Stoicism, Platonism, and Aristotelianism. According to this view, all reality is contained in a certain “Monad,” which is the basis of all reality. All that exists is a manifestation of the Monad or its emanations. The Monad itself exists beyond all mental perception in complete mystery. Consequently, Neopythagoreanism is an apophatic worldview. One of the emanations, namely the Demiurge, created the world. The “Fall” of humanity occurred when the rational and irrational souls were materialized.[[121]](#footnote-121) This worldview shares many common features with Gnosticism and the teaching of Marcion.

Middle Platonism (1st c. A.D.) was a mixture of various convictions that were not always clearly interconnected. God’s transcendence was emphasized as well as mysticism and the need for mediators between God and the world. Similar to Neopythagoreanism, in Middle Platonism we encounter the idea of emanations from the “One,” namely “Nous” (i.e., “Mind”), and “Soul.” Humanity’s goal is the ascent to God and ὁμοίωσις θεῶ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, that is, attaining to God-likeness as much as that is possible.[[122]](#footnote-122)

One could guess that these worldviews affected the famous Jewish philosopher from Alexandria – Philo. Correspondingly, we notice a tendency to apophatism in his teaching. The historian Sahakian writes, “Philo regarded God as exalted above all human understanding, hence as infinite, incomprehensible, nameless, and transcending human knowledge, and he insisted that the most that can be asserted about God is what he is not.”[[123]](#footnote-123)

The idea of the soul ascending to God was a fascination for Philo.[[124]](#footnote-124) Since this ascent requires the aid of mediators, Philo proposed the following: Logos, angels, and Wisdom. Through contemplation of the Logos and personal moral conduct, a person can ascend to God and unify with Him. Commenting on Exodus 24:2, Philo wrote, “But he who is resolved into the nature of unity, is said to come near God in a kind of family relation, for having given up and left behind all moral kinds, he is changed into the divine, so that such men might become kin to God and truly divine.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Yet, Philo still recognized the distinction between God and the deified human: “There is one true God only.”[[126]](#footnote-126)

Philo’s views differ greatly from the conventional Jewish understanding of human destiny. Gross comments that the religious atmosphere in which Palestinian Judaism developed was not favorable to the idea of deification.[[127]](#footnote-127) This observation confirms our suspicion that the theosis teaching did not arise from Jewish (Old Testament) teaching.

One of Ammonius Saccas’ students, Plotinus (205-270), furthered developed the Neoplatonic worldview and established its basic parameters. Plotinus was raised in Alexandria, but taught in Rome. Two of his followers, Porphyry (233-302) and Proclus (412-485), contributed to the development and propagation of Plotinus’ teaching.

Plotinus’ teachings consisted of the following.[[128]](#footnote-128) He centered his cosmology in a certain “Ultimate God,” which he called the “One.” A series of emanations flow out of the One, namely the Nous (i.e., “Mind”) and the World Soul. Matter is another emanation from the One, but it is the lowest and least pure of them. Nonetheless, matter reflects the spiritual realities that gave it existence.

The goal of life is return to the One, that is, to “ascend” to it. The first step in this process is personal purification through an ascetic and ethical lifestyle. The latter consists of observing the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice (the cardinal virtues in Aristotle’s ethics). By this means, a person can progress from the emanation “matter” to the emanation “World Soul.”

The second step is to rise above sensory perception in order to interface with the Nous by means of philosophy and contemplation. The third and culminating step is mystical union with the One. At this stage, the seeker no longer senses any distinctions between things, and does not even think about the One, but rather enjoys an organic union with it. Proclus recommended “mystical silence before the Incomprehensible and Ineffable.”[[129]](#footnote-129) Lossky describes Plotinus’ system thusly: “You enter into the sphere of the non-intellectual and non-existent… then silence unavoidably ensues.”[[130]](#footnote-130) The death wish of Plotinus was for that which was divine in him to return and be united with the Divine.[[131]](#footnote-131)

A person’s experience with the emanations is self-authenticating. This means that a person knows internally by intuition when he or she progresses from one emanation to another. The deeper one goes in this progression, the more one understands that all reality is a unity. The appearance of variety in the world is an illusion. The closer one is the One, this apparent “variety” disappears.

The One is beyond understanding or description. It is impersonal and inactive. There are no distinctions in it. It is omnipresent. All existence instinctively strives for reunion with the One and will, in the end, attain unification with it.

Plotinus thought it impossible to ascribe specific attributes to the One.[[132]](#footnote-132) We may not even speak of its existence. It is beyond existence and serves as the source of existence. Ascribing to the One specific attributes places limitations on it and makes it finite. Proclus taught, “We are not entitled to predicate anything positively of the ultimate Principle; we can only say what it is *not*, realizing that it stands above all discursive thought and positive prediction, ineffable and incomprehensible.”[[133]](#footnote-133) Plotinus was willing to speak of the One as “good,” yet he made the qualification that this attribute is not “inherent” to it.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The One does not act or think. It lacks will or self-consciousness. The presence of such features would require some kind of distinction in it. The One must remain “One.” Emanations flow out of it not by an act of the One’s will, but by necessity. Here, Plotinus operates on the principle that everything must produce something else. Therefore, the One must produce emanations. Yet, somehow, the emanations are distinct form the One. So then, Neoplatonism is not a true pantheistic worldview.

The “Nous” is the location of the Platonic world of “forms.” The Nous’ “thoughts” are aligned in two directions: toward the One and toward itself. This distinguishes the Nous from the One – the Nous has distinctions inherent to it, that is, two orientations.

The World Soul has two components: a higher and lower aspect. The higher aspect communicates with the Nous, and the lower part – with the material world. The Platonic “forms,” located in the Nous, are expressed in the world by means of the World Soul. In the world, they are known by the term “logos.” Matter is considered evil only when it fails to reflect these “ideal forms,” communicated by the Nous through the World Soul.

The human soul derives from the World Soul. It also consists of two parts: divisible and indivisible. The “divisible soul” is the physical body. The human soul became divisible and materialized due to humanity’s desire to be independent of the One.

### B. Effect on Christianity

Without doubt, Neoplatonism exerted a heavy influence on the worldview of the early Church Fathers. Bray relates, “Most of the leading theologians of the classical period of Christian dogmatic development had received a Neoplatonic education.”[[135]](#footnote-135) This system had its greatest effect on the Alexandrian Fathers, as Compleston notes, “Neo-Platonism exercised a profound influence on Christian thinkers at Alexandria.”[[136]](#footnote-136) In fact, not only was Plotinus a student of Ammonius Saccas, but Origen was as well. Sahakian relates, “(Origen) adopted Neo-Platonism as a philosophical foundation for Christian theology.”[[137]](#footnote-137)It is said of Athanasius, “In his understanding of God, Athanasius was heavily influenced by Plato, Plotinus, Albinus, and Proclus.[[138]](#footnote-138)

The Alexandrian Fathers, in turn, exercised their influence on the Church as a whole. Sahakian feels, “In the last analysis, Patristic theology and philosophy were actually based upon fundamental concepts of Hellenistic thought.”[[139]](#footnote-139) Pseudo-Dionysius, in particular, constructed his theology from Neoplatonic premises. According to Sahakian, “(Pseudo-Dionysius) introduced it into the Church so effectively that it remained there nine centuries.”[[140]](#footnote-140)

Pseudo-Dionysius styled himself as Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned in Acts 17:34. Today, all serious scholars agree that his works are pseudonymic. They note that no one cites his works until the sixth century. In addition, in his work *On Church Hierarchy*, he speaks of initiation into monastic vows and reading the Symbol of Faith during the liturgy. These practices did not exist in the first century. The Orthodox theologian Lossky even admits that the author of these books was not the individual mentioned in Acts who was acquainted with the apostle Paul.[[141]](#footnote-141)

Meyendorff writes that Pseudo-Dionysius’ goal was to “unite the Christian system with the hierarchical world of Neoplatonism. Dionysius quotes Neoplatonic authors in abundance, especially Proclus.[[142]](#footnote-142) Meyendorff, expressing his astonishment, comments on Pseudo-Dionysius, “Adoption of his teaching by the Church can be considered one of the most amazing phenomenon in history.”[[143]](#footnote-143)

At the same time, Meyendorff reminds us that, although Pseudo-Dionysius had a significant effect on the Early Church, the latter never totally accepted his teachings, especially his understanding of the sacraments.[[144]](#footnote-144) On the other hand, Burgess considers Dionysius as “perhaps the most influential intellectual father and spiritual master of Christian contemplatives both in East and West for a thousand years after his death. In the Middle Ages, his writings were put almost on the same footing as the inspired writers of Scripture.”[[145]](#footnote-145)

Other Eastern Orthodox writers also openly acknowledge that the Fathers’ borrowed from the Neoplatonic worldview. Lossky states that between Dionysius and Plotinus exists “a striking resemblance.”[[146]](#footnote-146) Lossky considers that Plotinus reached the height of ancient (non-biblical) thought and claims that many Church Fathers assimilated his thought and brought it to completion.[[147]](#footnote-147) Archimandrite Nikon lists Plotinus among early Christian writers and says of him, “Plotinus taught of ‘God-likeness’ even more precisely.”[[148]](#footnote-148) Furthermore, Nikon quotes him authoritatively.[[149]](#footnote-149)

Aside from Neoplatonism, Greek philosophy in general influenced patristic theology. Andrey Kuraev writes, “Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory Nazianzen were able to complete studies at the University in Athens (a still pagan institution) before it closed and counseled their disciples to include in their Christian walk the great pagan authors.[[150]](#footnote-150) In comparing Eastern and Western theology, Kuraev reveals the former’s dependence on Greek thought: “Rome never knew names like Aristotle and Socrates, Plato and Plotinus,”[[151]](#footnote-151) and, “The West received Aristotle and philosophers from antiquity (which were never lost to the Orthodox world)…”[[152]](#footnote-152) Lossky also sees value in borrowing from Greek philosophy:

Theology should be expressed in the language of the world. It was no accident that God placed the Church Fathers in a Greek context. The required philosophical clarity combined with a need for deep insight motivated them to purify and sanctify the language of the philosophers and mystics in order to communicate the Christian good news, giving it… its universal meaning.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Zaitsev summarizes well the effect of Neoplatonism on early Christianity:

In the mystical Christian tradition, a tendency is observed to speak about God in an obviously Neoplatonic manner, highlighting God’s unapproachable essence. This tendency reached its climax in the Areopagite, where His super-essential nature is constantly emphasized. It is seen in the works of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas as well.”[[154]](#footnote-154)

### C. Comparison of Neoplatonism and Patristic Theology

We will now investigate how the Neoplatonic worldview was expressed in the teaching of many Church Fathers and continues to find expression in the Church today, especially in the East. The teaching of the “ascent to God,” characteristic of Plotinus’ philosophy, is well accepted among Eastern Orthodox thinkers. Lossky, for example, writes that God’s “original plan was a direct and unmediated ascent of people to God.”[[155]](#footnote-155) This ascent is connected to an “effusion” from God and “descent” by God. Florovsky comments on the presence of this idea among earlier writers: “Following St. Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Maximus speaks of a charitable effusion or imparting of Good – a Neoplatonic image.”[[156]](#footnote-156)

We also note in this regard the patristic doctrine of salvation through the incarnation of God’s Son, as discussed and refuted in chapter 10 of this volume. The Son of God must become incarnate (i.e., “descend”) in order to become an ontological “bridge” between the uncreated God and created humanity, thus making possible people’s “ascent” to God. Many Church Fathers echoed the following thought: “The Son became man, so that man might become God.” However, representing Jesus as an ontological “bridge” corresponds, in Meyendorff’s words, to an “’Alexandrian worldview,’ according to which the world is structured by the principle of a hierarchical ladder.”[[157]](#footnote-157) It is necessary “to fill up the gap between the absolute God and relative creation.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Meyendorff acknowledges, “This was, however, a Hellenistic cosmology, dressed in Christian clothing.”[[159]](#footnote-159)

In the following except from Pseudo-Dionysius, we see a clear connection between his theology and the Neoplatonic conception of emanations from the One:

Since the All-perfect Goodness, in passing through all, not only passes to the All-good beings around Itself, but extends Itself to the most remote, by being present to some thoroughly, to others subordinately, but to the rest, in the most remote degree, as each existing thing is able to participate in It. And some things, indeed, participate in the Good entirely, whilst others are deprived of It, in a more or less degree, but others possess a more obscure participation in the Good; and to the rest, the Good is present as a most distant echo.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Keck claims that Pseudo-Dionysius’ concept of an angelic hierarchy (see chapter 13 of this volume) comes from Neoplatonism. He comments, “Each higher order of angels transmits knowledge and instruction through the next lower angels, and only the lowest rank of angels, the angels, interacts with the mundane world directly.”[[161]](#footnote-161) Burgess adds that the hierarchy of angels aids people to attain unification with God.[[162]](#footnote-162) In his work *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, John of Damascus approves of Pseudo-Dionysius’ concept of an angelic hierarchy (see 2.3).

Furthermore, Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of God as the “One”: “But One, because He is uniquely all, as beseems an excess of unique Oneness, and is Cause of all without departing from the One.”[[163]](#footnote-163) Like the Neoplatonic understanding of the impersonal One, the God of Pseudo-Dionysius is “in absolute rest and does not manifest Himself externally in any way.”[[164]](#footnote-164) Lossky supports this view: “The one God abides in absolute rest, and His perfect ‘immobility’ places Him outside of time and space.”[[165]](#footnote-165) Nikon notes that God, in His essence, enjoys “eternal rest.”[[166]](#footnote-166) Bray affirms that such a view derives from a Neoplatonism worldview, where God is found in “uninterrupted tranquility.”[[167]](#footnote-167) Bloesch makes the following objection to “Christian mysticism” in general:

The Christian mystic sought to maintain the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, but by envisaging God in Neoplatonic terms as a motionless, undifferentiated unity they were not able to preserve the biblical conception of a God who actively works in history and identifies with our pain and sorrow. To find the pure god, they said, we need to rise above words and images, time and materiality, to the realm of pure spirit.[[168]](#footnote-168)

We also find coherence between the Neoplatonic idea that “all returns to the One and unites with Him” and the following statement by Metropolitan of Moscow Philaret: “(His glory) is bestowed from Him, accepted by the participants, returns to Him, and in this, so to speak, the circulation of the glory of God consists of the blessed life and well-being of creation.”[[169]](#footnote-169) Pseudo-Dionysius concurs, “There is no single thing which does not participate in some way in the one, which uniformly pre-held in the uniqueness throughout all, all and whole, all, even the things opposed.[[170]](#footnote-170)

Archimandrite Nikon proposes that people play a key role in this cycle: “People, abiding in God, must lead all creation to deification, for which purpose all creation received its existence from God.”[[171]](#footnote-171) Florovsky cites the teaching of Maximus the Confessor in this regard: “Man must unite everything in himself and through himself unite with God”[[172]](#footnote-172) and, “The multitude of creatures are united around the single human nature.”[[173]](#footnote-173) Nikon confirms, “The lives of the holy Fathers testify that people who attain a high level of deification, deeply experience their unity with their entire surrounding world, awaiting the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:18-22).”[[174]](#footnote-174) In summary, “Everything will manifest God alone. Nothing will remain outside of God.… Everything will be deified – God will be everything, and in everything.”[[175]](#footnote-175)

So then, the human dilemma and dilemma of all creation is a descent into a condition of “disunity,” which leads to disfellowship with the “One.” Lossky writes, “After the original sin, human nature is divided, fractured, and torn apart into many individuals.“[[176]](#footnote-176) According to the teaching of Maximus the Confessor, the elimination of disunity in creation must take place gradually. First, the distinctions between the male and female genders must go, then between Paradise and earth, heaven and earth, spiritual and sensual nature, and, in conclusion, between the Creator and the creature.[[177]](#footnote-177)

The apophatic understanding of God’s incomprehensibility also derives from Neoplatonism. Meyendorff writes in this regard, “Dionysius follows apophatic theology: as among Neoplatonists, God is unknowable, ineffable, and cannot be subject to any affirmative definition.”[[178]](#footnote-178) Lossky acknowledges this similarity: “This approach (i.e. apophatism) is also employed by Neoplatonists and in Hinduism.”[[179]](#footnote-179) Zaitsev asserts, “It is necessary to note that apophatic theology, although it has a long history in Christian tradition,… in reality arose in Greek philosophy”[[180]](#footnote-180) and, “Apophatic theology traces its roots to the mysticism of Origen and Greek philosophy and receives its classic development in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius.“[[181]](#footnote-181)

A striking parallel exists between the concept of “emanations” from the One and the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of God’s “uncreated energies.” The God of Pseudo-Dionysius has two aspects: “Unities” and “Distinction.” These two aspects correspond to Plotinus’ system of the “One” and its “emanations.” Lossky describes Pseudo-Dionysius’ teaching: “’Unities’” are ‘secret abidings that do not reveal themselves’ – a super-essential nature in which God abides, as it were, in absolute peace and does not manifest Himself in anything outside. ‘Distinction,’ on the contrary, is the procession of the Divine outward... Its manifestations.”[[182]](#footnote-182) Zaitsev proposes that the system of “essence – energies” appeared in the works of Proclus and, through Dionysius, spread to the Church.[[183]](#footnote-183)

In addition, the system of “emanations” reminds us of the Orthodox understanding of the “sole rule” of God the Father, according to which the Son is eternally begotten from Him and the Spirit eternally proceeds from Him. Although patristic theology recognizes that the Son and Spirit’s “emanation” from the Father occurs on the level of God’s essence and not His energies, nonetheless, this “movement” of the Son and Spirit out from the Father strongly hints at a Neoplatonic origin of this idea.

One may also draw a parallel between the Neoplatonic concept of the “Nous” and the patristic understanding of God’s nature. According to Maximus the Confessor, Christ is the “source and focus of an ideal world.”[[184]](#footnote-184) Zaitsev comments that Clement of Alexandria “thinks of God, in general, as the ‘Nous.’”[[185]](#footnote-185) Similarly, Nikon speaks of the “Mind” as an irreplaceable element in the process of a person’s ascent to God: “The human mind is merely the reflection of the Eternal and First Mind, to which it corresponds. In this case, the human mind, as a symbol and reflection of the Eternal Mind, teaches us through contemplation of it to ascend to the First Image, the Eternal Mind.[[186]](#footnote-186)

Additionally, patristic theology echoes the idea of the penetration of the “World Soul” into the material world. Lossky equates this with the “eternal energies”: “In the created world… exists infinite and eternal energies.”[[187]](#footnote-187) Similar to Neoplatonic teaching, the Eastern Orthodox teach that the human soul is one of the elements that unites creation with God: “This harmony and unity appears in the connection between the material world and the human body, between the human body and soul, and between the human soul and God.”[[188]](#footnote-188)

Maximus the Confessor taught that God “encloses, unites, embraces and providentially connects with an internal connection all things that exist among themselves and with Himself.” This “hidden and unknown presence of the unifying Cause is present in all beings in various ways.”[[189]](#footnote-189) In addition, Maximus’ teaching of spiritual (mental) and sensual (physical) aspects of the world reminds one of the Neoplatonic concept of the relationship between the World Soul and the material world: “The world comprehended by the mind is found in the perceptible world, as the spirit (lit. ‘soul’) is in the body, while the perceptible world is joined with the world comprehended by the mind like the body is joined with the soul.”[[190]](#footnote-190) Vishnevskaya claims that Maximus went to the extreme of saying that the created world is part of God, and that the *logoi* in the created world subsist in the Logos that existed in God.[[191]](#footnote-191)

Similarities exist as well in how Neoplatonism and patristic theology describe the “ascent to God.” Both systems require the practice of virtuous living. Peter of Damascus wrote, “In the end they (i.e., the commandments) make a man god, through the grace of Him who has given the commandments to those who choose to keep them.”[[192]](#footnote-192) Likewise, Maximus the Confessor taught, “Love makes a man god.”[[193]](#footnote-193) In both systems, along with virtuous living, one must practice contemplation. Nikon states that through contemplation a person can “ascend to the First Image, the Eternal Mind.”[[194]](#footnote-194)

After mastering these ethical and meditative practices, the final step in both systems is mystical unification with God (or the One). In Lossky’s words, the worshiper must aim for the goal of “unification with God in His energies, or unification by grace, making us participants in the Divine nature.”[[195]](#footnote-195) Maximus the Сonfessor says the same: “He should make man a god through union with Himself.”[[196]](#footnote-196)

Maximus’ description of the believer’s ascent to God, as described by Florovsky, precisely matches the one proposed in Neoplatonism.[[197]](#footnote-197) The first step is recognizing the Logos in the created world (i.e., the “World Soul”): “The problem with knowledge is to see and recognize in the world its first-created foundations.”[[198]](#footnote-198) Thus, one begins with a more elementary contemplative task before attempting unification with God. Next, one moves on the the level of the “Mind” and then beyond: “The mind must leave the mental or intellectual world and ascend even higher to the mysterious darkness of Divinity itself” and, “The mind rises higher than forms and ideas, and communicates with Divine unity and peace.”[[199]](#footnote-199) Finally, “Only towards the end does the mind which is hardened in prayerful ‘ordeal’ know God.”[[200]](#footnote-200)

### D. Conclusion

We note many obvious and striking similarities between Neoplatonism, patristic theology, and Eastern Orthodoxy in their views on God and unification with Him. They are not merely chance occurences, but arise from a common source – the city of Alexandria. It is not accidental that, in general, the Alexandrian Fathers developed and promoted this teaching in the Church.

Eastern Orthodox theologians often object that the similarities between their faith and Neoplatonism do not concern the contents of their teaching, but simply the form of its expression.[[201]](#footnote-201) In other words, the Alexandrian Fathers did not borrow a worldview from Neoplatonism, but only structures and terminology in order to express Christian truth in a way more acceptable to their culture.

We admit that differences do exist between these groups. For example, in Neoplatonism there are no distinctions in the One, while patristic teaching acknowledges the Trinity. In addition, in Neoplatonism the emanations are manifestations of the One, while Orthodoxy teaches creation from nothing. Furthermore, Neoplatonists strive for unification with God, while the Fathers maintain the preservation of a person’s individuality. Another distinction is that patristic theology teaches the deification of the human body, which Neoplatonism rejects. Finally, Neoplatonism does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Therefore, we concur that the teachings of Neoplatonism and patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology are not identical. Nonetheless, there are enough common characteristics between these systems and sufficient differences from biblical revelation to confidently conclude that, in many ways, patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology is not Christianity expressed in the form of Neoplatonism, but Neoplatonism adapted to Christian teaching. We will list several foundational concepts common to both Neoplatonism and patristic theology, which have no biblical support, i.e., they are foreign to true Christianity:

- Apophatic depiction of God’s essence;

- Impassibility and immobility of God’s essence;

- Distinction between God’s essence and His energies;

- The interpenetration of God’s energies into creation;

- Creation of an ontological “bridge” between God and people;

- Return of all creation to God and its unification with Him;

- Deification of humans and all creation;

- Salvation through good works and contemplation, leading to unification with God.

It is misguided to think that these commonalities are simply random overlaps with Neoplatonism, or that they play an insignificant role in patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology – they form the very heart of patristic thought. These points do not align with Christian faith based on Scripture, but align with the philosophical system of Plotinus and his followers, whether pagan or Christian.

One must also ask that if the main reason the Eastern Fathers used this method was to communicate Christian truth to their culture, then why should the Church continue to employ this system today? These concepts are completely foreign to the modern mind and do not clarify spiritual truths, but rather muddle them.

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3. Иларион, p. 32. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, p. 45. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Осипов А. И. Путь богопознания. http://predanie.ru/film/videolekcii-i-propovedi/professor-aleksei-ilich-osipov/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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10. Bloesch, p. 41, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noted in Слове об обожении // Под ред. Архимандрита Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М: Сибирская Благозвонница, 2004. – P. 58. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pelikan, p. 265 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Material from Зеньковского В. В. История русской философии. Аудио-серия (V. Zenovsky, History of Russian Philosophy. Audio Series). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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17. Bloesch, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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23. Ibid., Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 67. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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30. Ibid., p. 63. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Лосский, Очерк мистического богословия, p. 28, 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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182. Лосский, p. 57. Translation from Google translator. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Ibid., p. 221-222. Yet, the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius differs from Neoplatonism in that the former taught that God, in His energies, expresses Himself, while in Neoplatonism, the “Nous” and the “World Soul,” being only emanations, are lower in quality than the One (Мейендорф, p. 302). [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
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