

ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL SCIENCE: KANT AS A BRIDGE TO THE APOPHATIC REVELATION OF THE ORTHODOX EAST

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ABSTRACT

The Orthodox theological worldview often finds itself confronted by the unspoken nihilism of empiricism, with little common ground for dialogue. This article establishes that common ground for discursive exchange through exploring the apophatic aspects of Kantian transcendental theology, which in turn can become a bridge to the Orthodox negative theology. Kant drew continental thought along certain foundational lines with his critique of pure reason and transcendental idealism; it was his way to locate empirical science with respect to the perceptual foundations of thought, which are properly understood philosophically. In this project, Kant would seek to secure the Christian faith in the transcendental—i.e., that which underlies all empirical experience. Even so, certain openings to traditional religious mysticism are also to be found in his project, particularly with respect to transcendental theology. This article explores these Kantian foundations for an apophatic transcendental theology in relation to the hesychastic writings of Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, and Nikitas Stithatos. This in turn becomes a new inroad for dialogue with empirical science.

Keywords: Apophatic Theology; Science and Religion; Immanuel Kant; Transcendental Theology; Hesychasm; Gregory of Sinai; Gregory Palamas; Nikitas Stithatos;

INTRODUCTION

This article¹ represents a constructive engagement with Kantian epistemology by taking the scholarship of Ayon Maharaj² and others forward into a new area of consideration—that of apophatic revelation. Recent scholarship has shown that Kantian epistemology may be open to some forms of mysticism, findings that serve to nuance and correct previous assessments that would have precluded this possibility. Mysticism, in this context, represents a source of epistemological intuition that can inform moral decisions, aesthetic judgements, and reflective understanding. More importantly, at least with respect to this present study, it also represents a source of non-empirical knowledge that is particular to religious and quasi-religious contexts. It is argued that this represents a starting place for new inquiries in the science and religion debate, allowing for Kantian critiques of pure

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² Maharaj, Ayon. 2016. "Kant on the Epistemology of Indirect Mystical Experience." *Sophia* 10: 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-016-0528-y>

empiricism to be taken further by considering religious sources of non-empirical knowledge that inform the totality of human experience. Specifically, this article takes this opening toward the apophatic, and by this means overcome certain challenges to non-empirical knowledge stipulated by Kant. The discussion then moves to show how this in turn creates an opening to dialogues in the apophatic East, specifically with respect to the Hesychasts Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, and Nikitas Stithatos.

1. THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION DEBATE

Very generally speaking, the questions surrounding the science and religion debate are not about declaring a victor, or even finding a way to harmonize the two sets of truth. For the theologian, it is vouchsafing the sacred from the profane. Scientific knowledge simply cannot be reconciled with the scriptures. Each speak to fundamentally different realities. To be clear, what I am saying is that it is not the truth claims that are in conflict, but the ways of regarding the fullness of reality that stand opposed. This is because science deals exclusively with empiricism, while scriptural truths, and the Patristic commentaries that arise from them, encompass a fuller account of our experiential reality by including the metaphysical as well as the empirical. Even more fundamental to this tension between the scientific and religious worldviews, it must be recalled that Patristic commentaries were written by those possessing a “scriptural mind” (to use Florovsky’s phrase), and who held a deeply liturgical appreciation of life. This is to say, they speak in a language meant for those within the faith tradition itself, and for those who are experiencing psychological effects of virtue and sin. Empiricism, on the other hand, seeks to objectify knowledge to remove all subjectivity—in effect, it decontextualizes and dehumanizes knowledge altogether, creating an epistemological absurdity.

Friedrich Lange of Marburg (1828–1875) points out the problems here. The objectivity of the natural sciences, he quite correctly remarks, resides exclusively in the common sensory organization of the human brain, and this fact explains how different people can report similar observations for the same phenomena³. The seeming mechanical materialism of the natural world is therefore, for Lange, not the result of its intrinsic properties but the categorization of sensible intuitions in the mind, as Kant described. So-called scientific objectivity, Lange concluded, is merely shared epistemological subjectivity through the Kantian perceptual manifold. But the mind and the Kantian soul were not limited by the empirical because the mind synthesizes its own inner world through which humanity retains its special cosmological dignity. In this way, Lange attempted to bridge scientific empiricism with the more humanizing traditions of German idealism with his claim that natural science itself exposes

“the same transcendental root of our human nature, which supplies us through the senses with the idea of the world of reality, and which leads us in the highest function of nature and creative synthesis to fashion a world of the ideal in which to take refuge from the limitation of the senses, and in which to find again the true Home of our Spirit”⁴.

As perceptive as this Neo-Kantian critique remains, it must be considered incomplete. These same questions were considered much earlier in history by the Patristic writers of the Orthodox East, whose own engagement with these epistemological issues,

³ Lange, Friedrich Albert. 1881. *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Present Importance*. Vol. 3. Trans. E.C. Thomas. London: Trubner and Company; 177, see also 202–4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 364–5

arguably, encompass more fully the totality of the human experience. But because they have never been reconciled, we are left today with two dichotomous two ways of regarding reality. In this, it is my contention that the science and religion debate is largely one of misunderstanding and miscommunication: if we were to draw a Venn Diagram of actual points of contention on particular truth claims, the overlap would actually be very small. Even so, these points of contention often become the focal point of conflict, and from there the theists and anti-theists fight their fights. This is also what gets the most attention in popular media. But what is really being fought over, however, is not so much the truth claims themselves, but which serves as a better “philosophy of life” for the general public. Little light gets casts in the heated polemics that then ensue.

This article is about creating new common ground for *respectful exchange* by establishing an epistemological opening in which to discuss apophatic theology in a Western philosophical paradigm. This will have the consequence of showing the limitations of the scientific worldview when considering the fullness of experiential reality, and how insights from apophatic theology can redress these shortcomings in contemporary academic discourses.

2. TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM

The theological questions surrounding Kantian philosophy are typically framed around the subjects of freedom versus necessity, and, to a lesser extent, the epistemological possibilities for a non-empirical “practical reason” emerging from his transcendental idealism. This later possibility, he argued, could allow for morality and religion in a world seemingly controlled by naturalistic necessity—the empirical character of the world being overcome by an inner ontological freedom. It was his defence of personal agency in the face of the mechanistic laws of science. This was the true threat of modernity according to Kant, and he saw his project as a way to break free from the moral nihilism that emerged from a strictly scientific worldview. Anderson and Bell (2010) describe it this way:

“Kant lived at a time when empirical science had made extraordinary advances. The theories of Newton and others apparently allowed us to explore and predict the movements not only of planets but also of everyday things with which we come into contact. This evident substantial progress in science seemed to contrast with an embarrassing lack of progress in such fields as philosophy and theology. Far from making progress, metaphysical debates (those beyond empirical science) seemed to be stuck in a mire of endless inconclusive disputes”⁵.

But to secure a new and irrefragable foundation for religion, Kant would have to limit metaphysical speculation by conforming it to a science of perception, and then specify precisely how far our reasoning powers may safely extend without losing itself to fictive excess. For Kant, this was to the limits of the synthetic *a priori*. From this defensible foundation, he proceeded to establish a metaphysics of morals, and in this way Kantian epistemology grew to support a philosophy of religion. More on this in a moment. But first, as just mentioned, this is how Kant is usually discussed in relation to religious ethics. My article, on the other hand, explores a different way to examine Kantian philosophy, one which will open a way to apophatic knowledge. To introduce it, however, I will need to delve further into his transcendental idealism.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proved that spatial and temporal awareness are not contained in raw sensory experience but, rather, are the products of the intellect itself,

⁵ Anderson, Pamela Sue and Jordan Bell. 2010. *Kant and Theology*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC; 13

which processes sensory information into recognizable ideas. Epistemology reached its high-water mark with Kant. No previously assumed premise or postulate survived his critical examination. Even the human “soul” had to be grounded in something actually provable, which, in this case, was consciousness itself (whose substance is *a priori* time as the ultimate object of the inner sense). But by beginning with a first principle of rational consciousness, all resulting conclusions regarding reality were necessarily contingent upon an experiencing subject for their existence. Kant could not give the visible world complete independence from our perception of it. In the end, all he could say was that the outer world appears the way that it does due to the particular nature of the human brain, which renders sensory data consistently according to its inner constitution. The mind’s “faculty of representation” thus determines the empirical character of the perceived phenomena. What sense objects are in-and-of-themselves cannot be determined beyond their intelligible properties. Kant therefore declared that the thing-in-itself was unknowable.

While the objects of perception have many intelligible properties, such as weight, volume, texture, hardness, friability, and so on, the idea of a thing-in-itself to account for all these knowable characteristics of empirical objects could only be a supposition of the intellect. The thing-in-itself cannot be proven outside a set of intelligible properties, all of which support the original Cartesian claim about phenomena. In Kant’s epistemology, even the existence of a reality external to self-consciousness could only be granted a provisional and indeterminate existence:

“That there is something real outside us which not only corresponds but must correspond to our outer perceptions can likewise be proved to be, not a condition of things in themselves, but for the sake of experience. This means that there is something empirical, that is, some appearance in space without us, that admits of a satisfactory proof”⁶.

Experiencing subjects require *something* to experience that exists apart from themselves, yet the empirical is always mediated through the spatial and temporal intuitions of the mind. And so, while the object of inner sense (self-consciousness) demonstrates the actuality of the “soul” (the experiencing self), which exists in time, the soul cannot be said to exist apart from the mind’s faculty of representation. Moreover, the form of outer phenomena is determined by the nature of our senses and cognitive faculties, and so Kant, unlike Schopenhauer, cannot give “ideas” existence apart from perception.

Yet it is here we find an unexpected opening to other ways of knowing and experiencing the world. Kant had declared that “*intuitions [from the senses] without [accompanying rational] concepts are blind*”⁷. It is a curious statement and quite noteworthy. What he is saying is that much more comes to the rational mind than the intellect can fully comprehend. Stated another way, Kant is conceding that people are actually blind to the full experience of the natural world because of the brain’s limited perceptual capacities. But those sensory intuitions still exist: we feel them. They just do not correspond to an isolatable and discrete rational concept fully available to the analytical mind.

Nevertheless, Kant did try to examine one of these unconceptualized intuitions, the sublime, which is experienced through a different way of knowing, a pre-rational kind of knowing, an intuitive pure knowing – by way of something Kant calls the “sacred shudder”

⁶ Kant, Immanuel. 1950. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*. Ed. L.W. Beck. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company; §49, 84

⁷Kant, Immanuel. 2007. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; B75/A51

(Schauer) felt in the presence of the power of nature⁸. It is an experience in which rational consciousness is obliterated before the inhuman and incomprehensible power of nature. Kant refers to this as the “dynamical” sublime⁹. A similar feeling of raw selfless perception can also arise when confronted with the enormity of a phenomenon – for example, a breathtaking vista overlooking a ravine framed by sheer cliffs. This is the “mathematical” sublime¹⁰. The sense of self can momentarily evanesce in sheer wonderment and awe in such settings; in effect, the intellect steps aside (as it were) and the sensory experiences are intuited pre-rationally at the periphery of rational awareness. Only later do we come up with words and descriptions that attempt to convey to others what we experienced.

Kant makes clear that the experience of the sublime is not one of sensibility alone; it is not like a “physical reflex” in the mind originating from sensory perception. Rather, the sublime is a real object of understanding and true for all experiencing subjects.

“[W]e are entitled to say is that the [empirical] object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind. For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility”¹¹.

Stated another way, certain sensible experiences are capable of bringing the mental phenomenon of the sublime to the rational mind even though the mind is not capable of fully fathoming the fullness of the dynamic or mathematical aspects. Yet it is still anchored empirically—that is, to an *initial stimuli* from the sensory environment: “*For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses partly of themselves produce [these] representations [in our mind]?*”¹². The sublime thus crosses that liminal space between empiricism and metaphysical revelation, and represents a kind of quasi-rational knowledge available for aesthetic reflective judgements, and even synthetic *a priori* applications in moral theology¹³.

Here we have found the first opening to a source of revelation outside the constraints of strict empiricism to be found in the writings of Kant. Yet it is not entirely free from empiricism since the initial stimulus is dependent upon the natural world. It is not, then, the kind of revelation typically thought of in religious experience, such as with apophatic experiences of an ineffably divine reality. Yet it still allows for the *indirect perception* of God to be discovered “*in the beauties of nature, of hearing God’s voice in the Bible[,] or in sermons[,] or in the dictates of conscience, of being aware of God’s providential activity in the events of our lives, of seeing God’s hand at work in salvation history, and so on*”¹⁴. This is indeed significant. Yet, by itself, remains incomplete. The question now becomes whether that stimuli for the sublime can come from non-empirical sources altogether. Kant, as we will see, remains doubtful if such a proposal can be defended. Yet, I will seek to show that he does lay the groundwork for it.

⁸ Hadot, Pierre. 2006. *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*. Tran. Michael Chase. Cambridge: Belknap Press; 270.

⁹ Kant, Immanuel. 1914. *Critique of Judgment*. Tran. J.H. Bernard. London: Macmillan and Co.; §28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §23

¹² *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction.

¹³ See “General Comment” in *Critique of Judgment*.

¹⁴ Alston, William P. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 25.

3. TRANSCENDENTAL THEOLOGY

Kant begins with a challenge, writing that all those who want to create a theology based in personal revelation must “give a satisfactory account how, and by what kind of inner illumination, he believes himself capable of soaring so far above all possible experience, on the wings of mere ideas”¹⁵. This is the very challenge this article seeks to overcome, and to do so using Kant’s own epistemological framework. But it must be underscored here that, obviously, Kant thinks such a theology is impossible. It is also a theology that would be necessarily rejected in the Orthodox East, considering the historical battles against Montanists and Gnostics, both of whom claimed special revelation outside Scripture. My article, for its part, does not seek to legitimize such claimed instances of new prophetic revelation; fictive imagination can be easily mistaken for ecstatic revelation, both then and now. This is why the Orthodox Church has remained faithful to both scripture and tradition, while Kant, for his part, would likewise only accept a religion based in sensible experience, or the possibility of such experience, since even “*synthetic a priori knowledge is possible only in so far as it expresses the formal conditions of a possible experience*”¹⁶. Instead, my article only seeks to show how hesychastic revelation is possible within a Kantian epistemological framework, and what that means for science and religion dialogue with the Orthodox East.

Based on what has been outlined so far, Kantian rational theology would seemingly be limited to a metaphysics of morals adapted for practical applications¹⁷. But Kant does venture to discuss other possible sources of knowledge. The first is a thought experiment on whether God can be claimed as a First Cause for the cosmological effects that can be known by experience. It is the well known cosmological argument for the existence of God, dating all the way back to Aristotle¹⁸. Kant is willing to concede this argument from natural theology, but only “as a favour” to those who hold to it to sustain their faith, but he warns that “it cannot be demanded as a right on the strength of an incontrovertible proof”¹⁹. Kant is very close to agnosticism here, and only concedes that such an idea of God, however tenuously grounded, still serves to give morality a “natural leaning” toward the highest possible theoretical good²⁰. But as a philosophical argument, Kant cautions that such speculation cannot lead to “new objects” of knowledge²¹.

The question whether divine revelation is at all possible within a Kantian framework represents a particular philosophical challenge, since, as Kant has said, sensory experience is the necessary beginning of knowledge²². Only through sensory intuitions can the *a priori* faculty of representation then add temporal and spatial contexts, and from this basis alone, judgements can be made regarding empirical reality. Yet he also acknowledges that pure *a priori* judgements, independent of all experience, are still possible, such as those produced through mathematical reasoning. This is an important consideration since Kant’s project was to extend and reveal the role of the *a priori* in other realms of knowledge, particularly with respect to moral judgements. But the question of a source of knowledge outside all empirical experience or pure *a priori* reasoning, and which has its origin in divine agency is another

¹⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A638/B666.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, A636/B664.

¹⁸ See Aristotle’s *Physics*, VIII.6.

¹⁹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A637/B665

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, A639/B667

²² *Ibid.*, B1.

question altogether. Kant does however address this issue, and his comments, reveal that he does not believe such a claim *is* possible.

First, he indicates that the idea of divine revelation *cannot* be categorically rejected. “*For no one can deny the possibility that a scripture which, in practical content, contains much that is godly, may (with respect to what is historical in it) be regarded as a genuinely divine revelation*”²³.

It is an interesting concession to a non-empirical source of knowledge, if it can be taken at face value. Yet, Kant makes it clear that he is not open to new claims of revelation. This is ostensibly because of what he says is the “contemporary state of human insight being what it is,” which appears to be a statement regarding fallen human nature²⁴. Kant seems to be saying that the ordinary human being is corrupted by sin, ancestral or otherwise, and thus a person is no longer capable of perceiving such revelation—a position that reveals his particularly Lutheran pedigree. The Orthodox view on human nature is not nearly so pessimistic.

Even so, and judging however by the spirit of his overall project, these concessions to historical Christianity may only be out of deference for its continuing cultural importance, not an acknowledgement that divine revelation was once epistemologically possible by certain specially illuminated individuals. This conclusion is bolstered by a deeper reading on his views on the importance of Holy Scriptures, in that their value resides in to the extent they conform to his own views on rational religion²⁵. Because of this, he writes, no historical religion can claim to be the correct one. “*There is only one (true) religion; but there can be faiths of several kinds*”²⁶. The one true religion is rational faith born of pure moral reasoning. He even goes as far as to say that Jesus can only be considered a moral exemplar to the extent he represents pure *a priori* rationality: “*Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared to our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as one*”²⁷. The same went for God the Father too. “*But whence do we have the concept of God, as the highest good? Solely from the idea that reason a priori devises of moral perfection*”²⁸. Kant’s aim was to reveal the true significance of the Christian faith through rational philosophy; only those truths confirmed by *a priori* rationality could show the way to a higher and divine world. All else, for Kant, was myth and superstition.

Once again it has to be remarked that such views are not shared in the Orthodox East. Kant upholds a Christianity denuded of its glory, and the great failure of his philosophy was the belief that the nature of the divine can be encompassed within rational thought alone. His was a God of the logicians, not that of the crucified Christ. Yet, curiously, Kant also writes there is one other way his transcendental idealism may be employed in the service of a transcendental theology, that of an apophatic corrective for his cold, unfeeling cataphatic logic.

Before proceeding, it needs to be mentioned that “apophatic” has a range of possible meanings. It can signify a corrective used to transcend the limitations of positive statements

²³Kant, Immanuel. 2008. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. San Francisco: HarperOne; 122 (emphasis in original).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁵ Enns, Phil. 2007. “Reason and Revelation: Kant and the Problem of Authority.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Oct.): 103-114; 112

²⁶ *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 98

²⁷ Kant, Immanuel. 2012. *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Second Section, 23 (emphasis added).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original

concerning the divine or the deity: it is a way of showing deference to the ineffability of God. And so, for example, saying that God is “love” would not be appropriate because the fullness of divine possibility lies beyond every declarative statement, which will always be derived from and limited to human relational experience. In the words of Gregory Palamas, “*Apophatic theology does not contradict or confute cataphatic theology, but it shows that although statements made about God are true and reverent, yet they do not apply to God as they might us*”²⁹. Apophatic theology thus attempts greater inclusivity by finding words and expressions appropriate to the divine as well as by offering a way to give a methodological nod to the impossibility of this task. The apophatic thereby safeguards the humility of the exegete. Kant appears to allude to this conception of apophatic theology when he writes,

“Transcendental theology is still, therefore in spite of all its disabilities, of great importance in its negative employment, and serves as a permanent censor of our reason, in so far as the latter [reason] deals with pure ideas which, as such, allow for no criterion that is not transcendental”³⁰.

There is a noteworthy tension here between his speculative theology and transcendental idealism. Yet, and this is significant, it is the theology that stands as the corrective over his philosophy, and not the other way around. While Kant cannot make definite claims about otherworldly realities, speculative theology he writes is still vital to orient faith toward the highest good.

“For if, in some other relation, perhaps on practical grounds, the *presupposition* of a supreme and all-sufficient being, as highest intelligence, established its vitality beyond all question, it would be of greatest importance accurately to determine this concept on its transcendental side, as the concept of a necessary and supremely real being, to free it from whatever, as belonging to mere appearance (anthropomorphism in its wider sense), [that] is out of keeping with the supreme reality, and at the same time to dispose of all counter-assertions, whether *atheistic, deistic, or anthropomorphic*”³¹.

This is necessary as a determinate condition to secure moral laws as having obligatory power to guide our behavior through practical knowledge³². Only transcendental theology can do this by, as he said, by *censoring* reason—that is, limiting its ability to deny all metaphysical claims about God. This is where an intellectualized belief in God can open up to a living faith, and mere deism moves to embrace true theism³³. Reason, on the other hand, is needed to dispose of all extraneous and inappropriate speculations about the divine, particularly those that seek to create anthropomorphic conceptions of God. Transcendental theology and speculative metaphysics must work together to establish a living faith guided by practical reason. But this is not quite apophatic theology, not yet anyway.

4. KANT ON MYSTICISM

There is no small amount of academic debate whether Kant was open to the possibility of mysticism. His contemporary, C.A. Wilmans, argued that Kantian thought is entirely compatible with mysticism—something that Kant himself would deny in writing, claiming mysticism was merely a “counterfeit philosophy,” and which would also be further

²⁹ The Philokalia. 1995. Volume IV. Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. Trans. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. London, United Kingdom: Faber & Faber; “Topics of Natural and Theological Science” 404, §123.

³⁰ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A640/B668 (emphasis added).

³¹ *Ibid.*, A641/B669 (emphases in original).

³² *Ibid.*, A634/B662.

³³ *Ibid.*, A633/B661; cf., A631/B659

refuted further by Kant's student, Reinhold Jachmann³⁴. Even so, the debate has continued, and defenders of the mysticism proposal point out affinities Kant himself expressed for works of the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), in his early work *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* published in 1766. Swedenborg had attempted to create a science of rational psychology based on our knowledge of the sensible body, the immaterial soul, and their interaction. Even so, it should be acknowledged that, in his later works, Kant would become unreservedly hostile toward mysticism: “*Mysticism, which can prosper in a rationalistic age only when it hides behind a system of school-metaphysics, under the protection of which it may venture to rave rationally, so to speak, will be driven by critical philosophy from this, its last hiding-place*”³⁵. Despite this, some scholars such as Stephen Palmquist (2000) argue that Kant was a “*closet mystic,*” and that a “*mystical feeling lies at the very heart of [his] Critical philosophy*”³⁶. The consensus of scholarly opinion, however, is that Kant was and remained hostile to all forms of mysticism throughout his life—see, for example, Wood (1992), Ward (1972), Smart (1969), and Baelz (1968)³⁷.

Recent scholarship has attempted to resolve this confusion with a closer analysis of different kinds of mysticism in relation to Kantian thought. Maharaj (2016) finds that Kant does indeed categorically reject the possibility of direct mystical experiences of super-sensible realities through a claimed special faculty of intuition. But, as Maharaj finds, Kant is open to the possibility of *indirect* mystical experiences of super-sensible realities—being indirect in the sense that they are not revealed in rational knowledge but rather as moral feelings and revelatory experiences that cannot be self-authenticated by critical reasoning. Maharaj gives an example of this from Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*:

“The persuasion that we can distinguish the effects of grace from those of nature (virtue), or even to produce these effects in us, is enthusiasm [Schwärmerei]; for nowhere in experience can we recognize a supersensible object, even less exert influence upon it to bring it down to us, though there do occur from time to time in the mind movements that work toward morality but which we cannot explain, and about which are forced to admit our ignorance”³⁸.

This is where Maharaj ends the quoted passage, since it relates to the scope of his investigation. For my inquiry, however, the remarks made by Kant immediately after are equally as important:

“To wish to observe such heavenly influences in ourselves is a kind of madness, in which, no doubt, there can be method (since those supposed inner revelations must always be attached to moral, and hence to rational, ideas), but which none the less remains a self-deception prejudicial to religion. To believe that there may be works of grace and that perhaps these may even be necessary to supplement the incompleteness of our struggle toward virtue—that is all we can say on this subject; beyond this we are incapable of determining anything concerning their distinctive marks and still less are we able to do anything to produce them”³⁹.

³⁴ Maharaj 2016; see also Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Religion and Rational Theology*. Trans. by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 331.

³⁵ *Prolegomena*, 83 (emphasis in original).

³⁶ Palmquist, Stephen R. 2000. *Kant's Critical Religion*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate; 299f., 379; Maharaj 2016.

³⁷ Wood, Allen W. 1992. “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion,” in Paul Guyer (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Ward, Keith. 1972. *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell. Smart, Ninian. (1969). *Philosophers and Religious Truth*. London: SCM Press. Baelz, Peter R. 1968. *Christian Theology and Metaphysics*. London: Epworth Press.

³⁸ *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Book IV, Part II, Sec.2

³⁹ *Ibid.*, (emphases added).

Take together, the passages reveal that Kant does believe the effects of grace are indeed real, and that are super-sensible in origin. Yet, he then makes two statements that create an interesting tension. First, he says a method must exist to determine the exact nature of these effects upon our cognition, especially as they relate to virtue. But then he concedes that “we are incapable of determining” any such method using his system of critical philosophy.

This is a true statement about the limits of Kantian rationalism to reach beyond the apophatic veil to grasp the true nature of the divine. While open to the possibility, his philosophy does not possess the means to descry what lies beyond its own rational limits. This is where the apophatic theology developed in the Orthodox East becomes important to this discussion, since it supplies the missing apophatic elements for his cataphatic framework. Put simply, the effects of grace Kant had written about can indeed be “produced”—or, stated more accurately, *solicited*—through Orthodox hesychastic practices. Firstly, though, I will go over the epistemological grounding for their practices.

5. AN EPISTEMOLOGY FOR THE UNKNOWABLE

Orthodoxy did not invent apophatic theology, only transformed it from its pagan forerunners. The most important of which was Plato, who declared that our minds could not hope to fathom the fullness of divine reality: “*The father and maker of all this universe is past finding out; and even if we found him, to tell him to all men would be impossible*”⁴⁰. His writings would be read by the early church, and many found his words to be wise and true⁴¹. An especially important apophatic theologian who emerged from this tradition was Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215 CE). Another great influence on Christian apophatic theology was the Neoplatonist philosopher, Proclus (5th century CE). In his *Elements of Theology*, Proclus asserts the highest knowledge of reality is not possible for us because human nature is subsequent to that higher reality, and we are thus epistemologically limited in what he can hope to learn:

“For all knowledge which arises through reasoning deals with beings, and in beings possesses the apprehension of truth, since it comes into contact with conceptions, and subsists in intellections. But the Gods are beyond all beings. ... If, therefore, the Gods are superessential, and subsist prior to beings, they cannot be apprehended by either opinion, or by science and discursive reason, or by intelligence”⁴².

What he is saying is that there is an epistemological divide between the “creation” (the human being) and the Creator (God) that prevents us from ever encompassing the totality of the Divine with our minds. Stated in plainer language, any created being is always *lesser* when compared to the fullness of the Creator; the “finite” cannot subsume the “infinite” within itself. Proclus instead held that the epistemological distance between the creations and their Creator must be overcome by other means. He called this secret way to knowing God(s) *theurgy* (θεουργία). It most often refers to special rituals that bring the person into contact with divine reality, an experience that imparts a different kind of experiential knowledge, the noetic, which was higher in a mystical sense than the discursive reasoning of the logical mind. For the church, the *theurgy* of Proclus would become a basis for a theology of the sacraments; it would be how the efficacy of Holy Communion and Baptism could be explained to the faithful.

⁴⁰ Timaeus, 28c.

⁴¹ See for example Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* Book V, Ch. XII

⁴² *Elements of Theology*, Proposition CXXIII.

Theurgy can also be used to describe Hesychast practices, the origins of which date back to at least the fourth century and the Egyptian hermits “who went into the desert to confront the devil and to get closer to God” through a life of solitude and prayer⁴³. It would eventually evolve over the centuries to become a mystical and ascetic way of life focused on true noetic prayer, sometimes referred to as “the prayer of the heart” by the Fathers of *The Philokalia*⁴⁴. Today, it is practiced by the faithful of many faith traditions through the recitation of the Jesus Prayer⁴⁵, especially after the example of the anonymous Russian hermit in the popular work, *The Way of a Pilgrim*. True Hesychast practice, however, follows an even greater ascetic rigor, employs special breathing practices during meditation, and is always performed the guidance of a spiritual Father. The aim, as expressed by Symeon the New Theologian (949–1024) was to attain a state of holiness wherein a vision of “uncreated light” (*aktiston fōs*) of God may be granted through special revelation⁴⁶.

Most importantly for this present discussion, the mystical theology of Hesychasm would be championed in the 14th Century by Gregory of Sinai, who was able to document the epistemological and methodological means by this was possible:

“The physical senses and the soul’s powers have an equal and similar, not to say identical, mode of operation, especially when they are in a healthy state [through Hesychast practice, and as opposed to a sinful state of being]; for the soul’s powers live and act through the senses, and the life-giving Spirit sustains them both. [...] They contemplate with clarity the *logoi*, or inward essences of things, and distinctly perceive, so far as possible, the single source of all things, the Holy Trinity”⁴⁷.

Gregory of Sinai goes on to describe the exact regime of practices needed to accomplish this physical and mental feat of mystical asceticism⁴⁸. He summarizes the path as follows:

“Noetic prayer is an activity initiated by the cleansing power of the Spirit and the mystical rites [of the sacraments] celebrated by the intellect. Similarly, stillness is initiated by attentive waiting upon God, its intermediate stage is characterized by illuminative power and contemplation, and its final goal is ecstasy and the enraptured flight toward God.”⁴⁹

The effects of grace from being present to this uncreated light of God would transfigure the Hesychasts bodily, such that they would be able to witness a revelatory mandala of grace in the world through their physical senses—perceiving, as Maximos Confessor would write, the *logoi* of created things⁵⁰. It also imparted spiritual gifts on the practitioner such as true faith, experiential knowledge of God, and steadfastness in a life a virtue. Palamas recalls the words of Plato on *phronesis* (wisdom), who wrote in his 7th Letter, “For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of

⁴³ Nicolaidis, Efthymios. 2011. *Science and Eastern Orthodoxy: From the Greek Fathers to the Age of Globalization*. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; 93f.

⁴⁴ For a survey of these Fathers and their commentary, see *Writings from the Philokalia: On Prayer of the Heart*. 1992. Trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E.H. Palmer. London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁵ This prayer reads as follows: “Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The aim is to embed the prayer into constant repetition in the back of one’s mind to achieve the state of being where one “prays without ceasing” as Paul commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

⁴⁶ Nicolaidis, 94.

⁴⁷ *The Philokalia* IV, “On Commandments and Doctrines,” §98, 233

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, §§99-113.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, §111, 237.

⁵⁰ Blowers, Paul M. *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*. Yonkers, New York: St Vladimirs Seminary Press; 54 (*Ambiguum* 7).

*continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter nourishes itself*⁵¹. So too, the Hesychasts must purify themselves through practice of the commandments and a life virtue, so that the uncreated light of God may “alight” in their souls like a leaping spark—an experience that imparts the *phronesis* of virtue.

Further insight is found with Nikitas Stithatos, a disciple of Symeon the New Theologian who lived in the 11th century. Stithatos distinguishes between the possible sources of insight. Some, he writes, are sensible in origin, drawing from one’s memory alone. They are to be ignored by the Hesychast. “*We have nothing to gain from such images*”⁵². True visions are not mutable like those in dreams or memory, and they are to be treated “with great seriousness” since they yield true insight, fill a person with awe, and inspire greater compunction in one’s soul⁵³. Finally, there is special revelation from God that enables a person “to contemplate in a way that transcends [that of] normal sense-perception”⁵⁴. These experiences of direct revelation of spiritual knowledge from God

“have the force of things and thoughts miraculous and divine, initiating us into the hidden mysteries of God, showing us the outcome of our most important problems and [may give an eschatological insight of] the universal transformation of things worldly and human”⁵⁵.

What he is describing are instances of apophatic revelation that gives a person true knowledge outside all constraints of Kantian sense-perception.

As for the question of how someone can become receptive to divine inspiration, Stithatos described the noetic faculties inherent to each person as intellect, reason, noetic perceptive capacity, intuitive knowledge, and cognitive insight—all of which work together in discerning apophatic insight:

“By means of intellection we apprehend spiritual intentions, by means of ratiocination we interpret them, and through noetic perception we grasp the images of divine insight and spiritual knowledge”⁵⁶.

Stated another way, when apophatic revelation alights in the intellect, the higher noetic faculties interpret and conceptualize those insights gathered from that communion with divine reality in hesychastic stillness. In opposition to Kant, Stithatos (like all the Eastern Fathers⁵⁷) held that a person can attain the spiritual purity once enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall. This is accomplished through “*the labour of repentance and assiduous ascetic practice*” by the hesychast, through which they “*acquire a disposition that is master of the passions, free from arrogance, not over-curious, guileless, simple, humble, without jealousy or malice, and that takes every thought captive and makes it obey Christ*”⁵⁸. Palamas confirms this same threefold epistemology of sense-perception, rational processes, and noetic faculties⁵⁹. He then goes further to demarcate the line between the cataphatic and

⁵¹ Seventh Letter [341d].

⁵² *The Philokalia* IV, “On the Inner Nature of Things,” 124, §61.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, cf. §64.

⁵⁶ *The Philokalia* IV, “On the Practice of Virtues,” 81; §10.

⁵⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373 CE) declared that all that was assumed by God in the Incarnation was healed: “He [Christ] manifested Himself by means of a [human] body in order that ... by His own impassability He kept and healed the suffering men on whose account He thus endured [the Crucifixion]” (*On the Incarnation*, §54). Athanasius’ theology of the Incarnation was codified at the ecumenical council of 451 CE.

⁵⁸ *The Philokalia* IV, 83, §17; see also the comments of Palamas in *The Philokalia* IV, 377f., §66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 375, §63

the apophatic. Even though these faculties coexist in the experiencing subject, divine revelation must obey the same Platonic epistemological constraints mentioned earlier.

“We know that those divine realities of which we desire to speak transcend speech, since such realities exist according to a principle that is [metaphysically] transcendent. They are not outside the realm of speech by some reason of some deficiency, but are beyond the conceptual power innate within us and to which we give utterance when speaking to others. For neither can our speech explain these realities by interpretation, nor does our innate conceptual power have the capacity to attain them of its own accord through investigation”⁶⁰.

Nevertheless, divine revelation still imparts specific knowledge to those who can receive these gifts of grace, including the experience God’s “*divine and inexpressible [uncreated] light, God’s divinity and kingdom, the beauty and resplendence of the divine nature, the vision and delight of the saints in the age without end, the natural ray and glory of the Divinity*”⁶¹.

CONCLUSIONS

Several points of consideration emerge from the preceding discussion. The Kantian critique of perception reveals that the empiricism of the scientific worldview emerges from an epistemological subjectivity that could only be understood through his transcendental philosophy. Kant then revealed that so much more is open to people than mere scientific knowledge, including the synthetic *a priori* and practical wisdom that emerges from the same. He even found a way to ground the Christian faith in his epistemology—a project that was, however, exceedingly reductionist and closed-off to the fullness of Christian religious experience. As to the question as to whether Kant was a “closet mystic” as some have alleged remains an unprovable point of scholarly contention. What is known is that his epistemology was open to the possibility of divine revelation outside sensory perception and synthetic *a priori* judgements. Ostensibly, Kant acknowledged the divine revelation within the Scriptures could be accepted, but only after rationalistic critiques in line with his own philosophical project—betraying a most curious mixture of Protestant and Rationalist assumptions. Even so, he then declared that this doorway to mysticism needed to remain closed because of fallen human nature.

Here, the theology of the Orthodox East can be employed to reopen the pathway to apophatic revelation within a Kantian epistemological framework. Orthodox theology, following Athanasius of Alexandria, upholds a view of human nature that was healed in the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ. And from this foundation, the Hesychasts found a means to make themselves receptive to divine revelation in ways that expand epistemology in harmony with Kant’s own preconditions for metaphysical intuition. This includes both indirect mystical experiences of God in the sublime of nature and Scripture, as well as direct noetic perception of ineffable metaphysical reality through hesychastic experience.

Specifically with respect to questions in epistemology, the Hesychast Fathers of the Orthodox East reveal that divine revelation first be perceived noetically—only afterward do the cognitive faculties come to bear on these non-sensory intuitions arising from the metaphysical transcendent. Even so, it has to be stipulated that what is being perceived is pure noetic experience of ineffable mysteries and, because of this, only a small shadow of which can be reduced to conceptual knowledge within a Kantian framework. This however does not diminish its value—quite the opposite in fact. These insights are essential for the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 383, §80.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 415, §147.

development of phronetic knowledge and the personal virtue needed to navigate one's way through life, which in Kantian terms would be called practical wisdom. It is also important to note that the apophatic tradition of the Hesychasts does not permit the creation of new Montanist-style heresies because the epistemological divide between what is perceived and what can later be communicated cataphatically; this also signifies the point where apophatic revelation transitions to Kantian epistemology. The upshot is that such revelatory experiences become an aid to the mind in its discernment of noetic, rational, and sensory truths. From here, the way is now open for the Orthodox East to enter into the science and religion debate.

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