

Language about God:
Perceiving beyond a Transcendent and Finite God

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Introducing Themes and Methods of God Language

Words are powerful symbols. However, like all symbols, they have limits. When something is described with words, the words can undermine the essential aspects of what is being described. Consider the word "God" and the ideas behind it. The word "God" evokes a wide variety of images, ideas, and emotional responses. These ideas, images, and responses become the basis on which we know and relate to God. People differ in their understanding of God, so encountering God communally creates a problem. People use language to describe experiences, but the ambiguity of language makes it easily misunderstood. Language about God is particularly ambiguous which affects perceptions of God. Discussions of God, with their attempts to define and narrow the infinite, therefore result in confusion and uncertainty.

Language provides no adequate or simple way to describe who or what God is. Even the smallest parts of speech present problems of great magnitude. For example, the pronouns "she" and "he" give us a God to whom we have assigned gender. Doing so asserts our power to in effect create God and hides God from both others and ourselves, and yet, we are human and must of necessity assign words and concepts to God. For many individuals God must be spoken of in human terms, including pronouns, or God is completely lost to them. Pronouns are only part of the struggle about God and language and are in fact one of the easier problems to deal with.

The language used to describe God also shapes our understanding of the characteristics of God. Pronouns assign gender, but so do nouns. God is described as "Father," "Son," and "King." All of these masculine terms immediately characterize God as masculine. Other more gender-neutral terms can also accomplish the same task. Nouns such as "Ruler" and "Rabbi" carry strong suggestions of masculinity no different from "Father" or "Son" or "King."

The issues of pronouns and characteristics are two of the main issues that will be addressed when looking at the way God-language has developed and is used in today's world. These two language areas have been of concern for some women. They have caused struggles in that typically when God has been written about masculine pronouns and characteristics are the focus. In order to demonstrate how pronouns and characteristics have affected women, and all theologians, an analysis of some responses of feminist theologians to the portrayal of God as masculine will be explored. Sociological research and discussions of God language as a social construct will complement the discussion of these theologians.

Language about God has also limited God. In shaping our understanding of God, language can narrow or broaden our perspective. Concretely describing what God is ignores the risk of forgetting that God is beyond human comprehension. In trying to describe a God that cannot be described thoroughly a limit is placed on what God can become. There is more to God than language can describe, and people have often attempted to solve this problem in one of two manners. The kataphatic approach attempts to define who/what God *is*, while the apophatic approach attempts to define who/what God *is not*.

Kataphatic and apophatic thinkers create a dialectic tension that may actually provide a less limited understanding of the limitless God. This tension is vital for dialogue to continue. Without tension meaningful discussion of the nature of God is impossible. Contrasting methods of viewing God are necessary in describing God. Therefore, by recognizing concerns in describing who God is and holding these concerns together through the kataphatic and apophatic dialectic, a better understanding and description of the indescribable God is achieved.

After analyzing the situation for women in God language as well as the tension of the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic, possible solutions to talking about God and God language can

be attempted. Difficulties with language about God are not recent theological problems. In fact, historical arguments may offer a lens through which to view the problems faced. Thomas Aquinas, for example, uses both kataphatic and apophatic theology to describe God. Thomas, along with the Eastern Church, provides an example of how God language can allow all individuals to grow in their relationships with God while at the same time explaining God in the best way possible. These two examples will show what is possible in describing God in a manner that is true to God while being accessible to humans.

From the historical argument, a return to the contemporary with fresh insights about such ideas as gender being a social construct and language being a metaphor is needed. This informed approach might in turn offer a means to explore the varieties of linguistic approaches to God, expanding simultaneously one's understanding of both God and one's neighbor's understanding of God. Thus, through all of the explored pieces of who God is, how God can be explained by humans, and the relationship between God and humanity, it will be evident that language about God cannot be confined to finite nor transcendent language. God language must encompass both of these aspects for God to be adequately described. Only through this combination can God's true nature begin to be understood.

Voicing Concerns about God Language Today

When people begin to describe God they often tend to relate to God through their experiences. For centuries humans have experienced God most often as being masculine. In Western society men have played the dominant role, and therefore the dominant culture, in effect, constructed God as masculine to fit with those who controlled culture. In the last half century women have made great strides towards equality with men and have begun to challenge the masculine image of society. Within this framework, uncritical masculine ideas about God have been challenged and women have continued to articulate their struggles with the image of a masculine God. These struggles have led to women questioning the true nature of God. Questions pertaining to God's gender have been among the most complex for the church to answer.

Today the idea of female characteristics being attributed to God is not unusual, but the struggle for the church to view God in this manner has been a long and arduous process for many, both women and men. The history of feminist theology is a winding journey through many emotions and phases. In feminist theology and the ideas that have evolved about God language through it, God has at times been portrayed differently than in mainstream theology. By looking at some theologians of the past fifty years, both inside feminist theology and in mainstream theology, I seek to demonstrate that ideas about God language are full of both strengths and weaknesses.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when feminist theology began. At some point in the twentieth century the woman's voice began to be heard as it had never been heard before in many aspects of society, including that of theology. A formal lineage of feminist theologians, a chronology, does not do justice to feminist theology. Feminist ideas have become a part of all

aspects of theology, so a timeline of strictly feminist theology is misleading. However, in order to understand the specific problem of ascribing characteristics to God, some comments about feminist theologians' treatment of God language must be discussed along with other work dealing with language about God. The basic ways to relate to God are through shared experience with God, through symbols and metaphors, and through language. Nearly all theologians, when describing God, use these categories. Utilizing these characterizing will simplify the complexities found in theology today and can create a starting point for additional dialogue about how to discuss God.

God as Being—Mary Daly

Many early feminist theologians spoke of liberating women from the grasp of a male-dominated school of thought. One such person was Mary Daly, who in 1968 wrote her first book, *The Church and Sexuality*. This book shaped her understanding as a "reformist feminist," as she likes to call herself. A major contribution came in 1973 with *Beyond God the Father*. This book begins anew outside existing structures about God language. Instead of reforming the existing modes of thinking about God, she proposes the idea of be-ing; that is, living without needing a descriptor outside of oneself in order to be legitimate. Once God is seen as be-ing, then humans, especially women, can be seen in the same light.¹

Daly's ideas about allowing God to stand on God's own legitimize who God is and allow God to be Godself without the human constraints placed on God by humans. By portraying God as outside existing structures, Daly does not limit God, but allows God to be as God. While

¹ Daly summarizes her own thoughts and reemphasizes her basic ideas of her now radical feminist journey in the "original reintroduction" of the second edition of *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Beacon, 1985), xi-xvii.

these ideas appear to have merit, they have downfalls as well. It is extremely difficult to begin anew outside ideas existing within theology. Theology has so much history that all new ideas would be seen through that theological history. By putting God outside of human descriptors, Daly may create no way to relate to God. While ideas need reinterpreting, starting over outside existing ideas is not a practical option. Human characterizations are necessary in order for humanity to understand God. Daly's idea about women not needing male descriptors to legitimate themselves has merit, but the analogy cannot apply to the relationship between God and humans.

God Imagery—Phyllis Tribble

A few years after Daly, Phyllis Tribble began discussing the biblical portrayal of God, especially focusing on neglected images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Exploring both male and female imagery of God she found that being created in the image of God paralleled being created female and male. This concept illuminated her thinking that God could be a monotheistic God with attributes of both sexes.² God did not have to be only male. After her contribution to language about God, Tribble's work shifted to women in the Hebrew Scriptures who had suffered. A second book, *Texts of Terror*, published six years later, detailed the horror stories of four selected narratives. By focusing on these "sad stories," she illuminates the manner in which women are portrayed in the Bible and allows their stories of suffering and persecution to speak for themselves.³

² Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

³ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xiii-xiv.

Trible's ideas about a God with both female and male attributes illustrate that God does indeed have characteristics of both men and women; in fact it may be said that men and women have characteristics of God instead of the other way around. However, there are some difficulties with seeing God as monotheistic with attributes of both sexes. When God is portrayed in this manner, with dual assignment of attributes, it is difficult to relate to God and the problem of pronoun usage is still not solved. Given Tribble's approach, a solution could be, perhaps, to use feminine pronouns when citing feminine attributes and masculine pronouns when citing masculine attributes. Holding together a single God with both masculine and feminine attributes is also problematic. The situation is similar to that of the ancient Egyptian god and goddess Osiris and Isis.

God Metaphors—Terence Fretheim

Terence Fretheim wrote about the suffering of God with hopes of opening up an understanding of God that had been overlooked in biblical studies. By focusing on metaphor, Fretheim sheds new light on ideas about how God is portrayed in the Old Testament. Metaphors in the Old Testament, such as those he studied, have allowed God to be more accessible to people. Metaphors such as warrior, king, sufferer, and comforter hold a place within his thinking. For him all metaphors are both "reality depicting" and not literal.⁴ While Fretheim may not be a feminist theologian, his ideas follow those of feminists who have focused upon the idea of relating to God.

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

Fretheim tries to provide a different avenue through which God can be seen by people. To him, if humans can relate to God through metaphors, then a better understanding of God as a whole can be obtained. His ideas are valid as long as many metaphors are used to describe God. He articulates a viable avenue within the already cluttered language of metaphor and description to relate to God.

“God” being Tainted—Elizabeth A. Johnson

The idea of being made in the image of a male God has caused many feminists to wince. Elizabeth A. Johnson believes that even the word “God” has been so tainted by androcentrism that to continue to use the word to define the Most High is blasphemous and causes inherent suffering to women.⁵ Johnson’s book, *She Who Is*, builds upon Tribble’s work by seeking both in the Bible and beyond it trying to unlock the mystery of the divine through feminist means. One area in which God relates to women in a unique way is through the idea of suffering. God pours all of Godself out for each individual, much as women have given all of themselves with little to gain.⁶ Many of history’s conceptions about God are brought to the forefront and challenged in Johnson’s writings, including ideas about God language. Johnson believes that by acknowledging the enormous scope of God language one can be freed from being purely descriptive and can liberate those involved in the struggle over God language.⁷

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse*, (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 42-43.

⁶ Ibid., 247.

⁷ Ibid., 112.

Like Daly, Johnson would like to start over outside the current language about God. However, she realizes that God cannot be completely recontextualized outside of present day thinking; while the term "God" is tainted, it must still be used. By talking about being freed through God language, Johnson leads later thinkers to continue her work. She may not have a new way of interpreting God, but she opens the door for dialogue after her work.

God/ess—Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether has been at the forefront of feminist theology for several decades. She has added a feminist perspective to a wide variety of religious topics. As her contribution to the conversation on God language, she proposed the use of the term God/ess to remind us that God is both masculine and feminine but yet is still one single deity.⁸ Beginning with the Civil Rights, she has also assisted in defining the feminist movement in response to ecology, third-world nations, and many other areas of feminist dialogue. Her contributions to these differing areas can be whittled down to a search for what is right and attempting to liberate people in their struggles against existing social norms. Her work has all been within the boundaries of theology.⁹

As a central figure in feminist theology, Ruether's contribution to God language has been held in high regard. The term God/ess is worth contemplating, although it may move too far outside the current picture on ideas about God in the same way as Daly and Johnson. Her term brings up thoughts comparable to those of Tribble, that is, thoughts of a two-headed God, one

⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 46.

⁹ Rosalind Hinton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, "A Legacy of Inclusion: An Interview with Rosemary Radford Ruether," *Cross Currents* 52, no. 1 (2002): 28-29.

being female and the other male. This two-headed God is a difficult manner through which to be reminded of both the masculine and feminine characteristics of God.

God relationships—Sue Monk Kidd

A more recent attempt at describing the way in which God should be discussed has come through personal stories. Sue Monk Kidd was a successful inspirational Christian writer. She tells of her struggle within Christian tradition and the painful journey that she embraced in order to dance with the spirit and awaken the sacred feminine within. Kidd's story illuminates the struggles facing women within the church today. By trying to understand such struggles, all people can participate in meaningful dialogue with feminist theology. Kidd has come to realize that she cannot view God as a masculine deity, nor can she be a part of the church she was raised in. By leaving the patriarchy behind, she has a fuller relationship with the God she wants in her life.¹⁰ Kidd's story is included in order to demonstrate that the gender of language about God is an issue facing not just those within academia. Describing and ascribing attributes to God is a problem facing many, especially women, who are conscious about who they really are in relation to God.

Kidd's personal ideas about how her relationship with God are useful in acknowledging that many people need to relate to God in their own way. She paints her own picture of who God is to her. Painting one's own picture of God is one idea that must be constantly in each of our minds. God may be described differently, but there must be a way for different individuals to be in dialogue about God. Kidd needs to take her work an additional step in clarifying her ideas regarding ways that people can relate to God together.

¹⁰ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

Experiencing God—Rachel Ann Foster and Renee Babcock

Foster and Babcock propose that the gender of God should not be eliminated altogether.¹¹ They found different people relate better to a God of one gender than the other. These two women hypothesized that women and men would relate differently to a male god-figure than a female one. The 435 college-aged participants in their study were asked to write a story about an encounter with God. The participants were told that God was either female or male; then the results were analyzed, searching for certain characteristics. The gender of the person writing as well as the gender of God caused significant differences in their stories. Men more often wrote action stories, while women wrote more about feelings. Those writing about a female God were more skeptical and demanded more proof of divinity, but were more likely to experience reassurance and comfort through their encounter with God.

The results of Foster and Babcock's study emphasized the findings that a female divine needed to prove its divinity more than a male one did. However, this was not the most important aspect of the study. The conclusion that a female God was seen as offering more reassurance and comfort than a male God emphasizes how strongly one's ideas about the gender of God influence human conception of who and what God is. The implications of how God is portrayed need to be taken seriously.

¹¹ Rachel Ann Foster and Renee L. Babcock, "God as a Man Versus God as a Woman: Perceiving God as a Function of the Gender of God and the Gender of the Participant," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11, no. 2 (2001): 93-104.

Historic Texts—Gail Ramshaw Schmidt and Erik Routley

Mainstream Christianity has recently begun to grapple with ideas about gender equality. How God should be talked about in everyday life as well as within linguistics and hymnology are a part of these struggles. In the early 1980's Gail Ramshaw Schmidt and Erik Routley began a dialogue about how to refer to God in their specific areas of specialty, linguistics and hymnology. Schmidt, the linguist, noted the problems encountered in God language, namely trying to talk about God without placing gender upon God.¹² She proposed over twenty years ago that the use of pronouns when referring to God should be eliminated.¹³ Today this proposal is finally being implemented in people and places where God language is important. Individuals who try to remain true to ideas such as Schmidt's will occasionally refer to God with gender. If individuals are not willing to make a conscious effort to avoid such language, then progress cannot be made in changing the image of a male God that has shaped the church historically.¹⁴

The issue of what to do with historic texts elicits greater debate. Schmidt herself says that there is no clear answer when trying to define what should be done with texts that treat God as male or female.¹⁵ Erik Routley, a hymnologist, examines these specifics. He states that in order to be true to what has been written previously the words should not change beyond what the writer could have written.¹⁶ For Routley, hymnology, often quotes something from the past.

¹² Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56, no. 2 (1982): 117-131.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 127-129.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Erik Routley, "The Gender of God: A Contribution to the Conversation," *Worship* 56, no 3 (1982): 234.

Paraphrases of biblical passages and other historical texts, when put into hymns and songs should be changed to account for new understandings about who God is in relation to humans.¹⁷

Gender as a Social Construction—Bernice Lott and Diane Maluso

The ideas of inclusive language about God have thus far been confined to specific theologians. They have discussed God in male and female terms. Most scholarly thinking does not portray God as only male or female, but without gender or with both genders. When thinking about God language and how to define God, the question remains: is God above gender, or does God have both female and male gender?

In response to this question of gender, the idea of gender being socially constructed must be examined more thoroughly. Two sociologists who have described gender in this manner are Bernice Lott and Diane Maluso. For Lott and Maluso gender is constructed from “particular conditions (and) experiences . . . that are used as a basis for socialization and for the ascription of social status.”¹⁸ Gender is a learned concept created by humans that helps with human understanding of how to behave when relating to others. Gender is constructed throughout one’s lifetime. Placed next to other constructions and stereotypes, gender is a weaker construction and will lead to failed expectations. Gender is not a reliable method of predicting the actions of someone.¹⁹

Lott and Maluso provide a glimpse into the function gender plays in society. Gender is not a given, but is molded and shaped differently for different people. Perceptions about gender

¹⁷ Ibid., 235-236.

¹⁸ Bernice Lott and Diane Maluso, “The Social Learning of Gender,” in *The Psychology of Gender*, eds. Anne E. Beall and Robert J. Sternberg (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 99.

¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

are not equivalent for everyone. Understanding gender as being socially constructed can assist those who use gender as a means of describing God. By better understanding the role gender plays in society, gender can assist understanding of God language. By trying to reinterpret ideas about God, the conversation for new ideas about who God is has been expanded. The limits that gendered God language has placed on God can be diminished.

Summary

In conclusion, the individuals discussed have added to the conversation of God language in order that their interests can be dealt with while remaining true to the God they perceive. As stated earlier, the basic modes of relating to God are through shared experience with God, through symbols and metaphors, and through language.

Trible, Kidd, and Foster and Babcock believe that through shared experience with God individuals can relate to God. One of Trible's foci was the suffering of women in Hebrew Scriptures, which allows today's suffering women to clarify shared experience with God. Kidd's shared experience with God develops through her attempt to journey from Christian tradition to the sacred feminine in a contemporary manner. Foster and Babcock's study links humans to God through experiences based on the gender characteristics assigned to God and each participant's gender. These four writers illustrate the concept of shared experience with God in God language.

Symbols and metaphors create another category to relate to God through. Trible appears again in this category when she explores both the male and the female imagery of God in the Bible and uses this imagery to state that men and women have characteristics of God instead of the other way around. If humans can relate to God through multiple metaphors, then Fretheim

presumes that a better understanding of God can be obtained. For Tribble and Fretheim symbols and metaphors become a powerful mode using human language to describe God.

Language becomes the primary scheme through which Daly, Johnson, Ruether, and Schmidt and Routley relate to God. By viewing God as be-ing, Daly attempts to create a new structure of God language instead of reforming the existing mode. Even the word "God" has been tainted to the point that Johnson believes its use should be discontinued due to inherent suffering caused by the word. God/ess is Ruether's contribution to God language. Schmidt and Routley propose that paraphrases of biblical passages and other historical texts should account for new understandings of God language. These authors' basic mode of relating to God is through language.

Lott and Maluso contribute to this discussion by describing gender as socially constructed. Combining Lott and Maluso's thoughts with the three categories of God language assists in describing God. Using their concepts of gender being socially constructed one can turn to similarities between gender and language. All of the scholars discussed have a method of describing God that they constructed. These methods, along with all other methods of describing God, are created by humans. Thus, to a certain extent all language is socially constructed. Since language is a human construct, it must be utilized with caution when characterizing God.

By characterizing God through categories of God language, a foundation upon which additional concepts through which God language can be addressed has been established. Thus, additional insights will build upon the foundation laid here and create a dialectic of talking about God.

We have analyzed thus far ideas about God that are found today. Theologians discussed has added to the conversation of talking about God that allows their individual concerns to be

addressed and allows them to remain true to the God they perceive. Each individual has found the old method of seeing God to be unacceptable, but has not created a proposal for discussing God that can be honored by all. The subsequent chapter will describe a manner of thinking about God that is already in use that could become the model for talking about God and the problems of finite and transcendent language.

To this point many voices have been presented that contribute to the conversation defining God language. All voices in the conversation must be heard for meaningful dialogue to take place. Without every voice the dialogue ends, as multiple viewpoints are necessary for God language to be richly developed. All the differing voices are not going to agree with one another. Thus, tension between differing voices is going to occur. This tension is positive, for tension through dialogue becomes the means of defining God language.

Using a Dialectic to Talk about God

Now that a small picture of where the theology of God language has been and that the concerns of theologians with this language have been established, I will propose a dialectic of kataphatic and apophatic ideas as a possible way of categorizing God language. It has been demonstrated that many scholars have a problem with God language to varying degrees. While scholars try to describe in their own unique ways what God is through their writings, they find the task difficult. Herein lays the problem--describing God. There needs to be a method of describing God that remains true to each theologian's principles while listening to others. Trying to hold these concerns together is what feminist theology, along with all theology, must strive for. In current feminist theology, the tension inherent in theological dialogue is removed when the focus is centered upon one's own principles while neglecting the principles of others. Often feminists are seen as a threat to former ways of thinking for these reasons. While feminist thinking about God language is at times a confrontation with the traditions of the church, new ideas on God language is a welcome change for most theologians.

God may be the most difficult thing to describe that humans have ever attempted. A disclaimer is often used when talking about God, because human language is not equipped to do it. No matter what method is used; shortcomings still remain in descriptions of God. When discussing what God is and while making sure that whoever is talking about God also understands that God is more than what is described, there is always tension in God talk. This tension is due to a dialectic that the limits of language naturally create in trying to discuss God. By better understanding this dialectic, God can begin to be described while not being limited. The first step in understanding the complexities behind God language is to identify the dialectic.

The beginnings of the difficulties in describing God are seen in God's response to Moses in Exodus 3. Moses asks God what God should be called. Often Exodus 3:14 is translated "I am who I am." A more literal translation may be "I will be who I will be."²⁰ One way of analyzing this phrase is to say that God is trying not to limit the descriptions that are possible when describing who God is. If God is who God will be, then perhaps one should let God be that entity without putting human limitations on God. The problem then becomes relating to a God who has no name and cannot be described. It is extremely difficult to have faith in and worship a God that cannot be described beyond the very limited description in Exodus 3:14. Ever since this moment the faithful have been trying to describe God so that everyone can have a better understanding of God in order to relate to God.

The difficulty in describing God is an issue to ponder. It has become apparent that God cannot continue to be described in the ways that God has been defined over the past millennia. While human language cannot adequately describe God, it is imperative that the portrayal of God be as accurate as humanly possible. In the past, describing God in the best possible way has not always happened. Now the focus must be on accomplishing this goal.

In the past half century increased attention has been given to the ways that theology and the church have fallen short in trying to describe God. Women have said that describing God as male and masculine is not acceptable in today's society. God is not male and masculine, but is not also female and feminine. God has characteristics of both. Some would respond to these ideas by saying that God is above gender and has no gender characteristics. This idea does not allow for God to be adequately described, because human categories are needed to relate to God.

²⁰The translation of Exodus 3:14 is based upon my own limited study of the Hebrew Language and is my own interpretation of the text. Additional references to biblical passages are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

These categories are the basis for relationships with one another; thus, they are some of the best categories in attempting to articulate relationships with God as well as attempting to describe who God is.

In response to all the varying ways that God can and cannot be described, a dialectic is necessary. This dialectic holds ideas about describing God as masculine and feminine in tension with ideas that God does not have any gender characteristics. Due to how society was arranged when people began formulating and recording ideas about God, God has been described almost exclusively as masculine and male throughout Christian history. In recent years there has been a strong feminist movement away from using only male language to describe God. The need to equalize female and male language when describing God, while at the same time recognizing the limits of language, is paramount in describing God accurately.

The first step in describing God accurately is to define the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic in order to realize a better understanding of how to hold ideas about God's transcendence and gender in a creative tension. The next will be to illuminate this dialectic with examples from Christian history depicting what happens when apophatic and kataphatic tension is lost. The final segment describes what it is like to live creatively in the tension between these two ends in order that God can be described in the best possible way while holding true to God's transcendence.

The Apophatic and Kataphatic Dialectic

There can be a tension between describing God too much and not describing God enough. A constant struggle takes place to ensure that God does not become limited by God language. In order to show that God can be described while remaining true to the notion that

God is indescribable, the dialectic between apophatic and kataphatic theology needs to be introduced and explained.

“Apophatic theology” describes many types of theology, although it in itself is not one particular theology. Therefore, the term “apophatic theology” may not be exact, but it describes what God *is not* as opposed to describing what God is. While this type of theology is useful, to have faith in a deity is difficult when that being is described only with negative terms. As a result of this difficulty there can be no purely apophatic theology. A subset of apophatic theology has called for an apophatic feminist theology in which God is described without male or female characteristics but as transcendent. While God may be transcendent, this severely limits our relationship with God by making God too abstract. If feminine and masculine characteristics are not ascribed to God, humans lose part of their relationship with God. The most often occurring relationship for humans is with one another. If this relationship cannot be used as analogous to one’s relationship with God, then it is harder to describe God. While recognizing that giving feminine and masculine characteristics to God has limitations, these ascriptions are necessary in order that a relationship with God is possible.

Apophatic theology must be in constant tension with kataphatic theology. Kataphatic theology delegates characteristics to God. The problem with kataphatic theology arises when the uniqueness of God is not emphasized and God is no longer indescribable and beyond human understanding. Often God is described anthropomorphically, as human-like, when portrayed with purely kataphatic theology.

In order to illustrate the need of using gender classifications to relate to God, further exploration of the dialectic between kataphatic and apophatic is necessary. Kataphatic theology positively assigns characteristics to God. That is to say, it wants to give God characteristics in

order to understand better the God being discussed. In essence God is the fullness of being.²¹ This kataphatic approach to theology has found its home in Western philosophy and theology. The councils and creeds of the early church are easily accessible examples of the kataphatic approach.

The Trinity

The first ecumenical council of the Church took place at Nicea in 325 C.E. The Council of Nicea gathered together approximately 300 bishops along with other clergy of the Church to discuss Arius and his doctrine casting doubt on the divinity of Jesus. The leaders of the Church gathered at the request of the Emperor Constantine to bring an end to the controversy surrounding Jesus' divinity. In the process of discussing this issue the Council began formulating the ideas behind the statement known today as the Nicene Creed, and began the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.²²

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is one specific example of kataphatic theology. The Holy Trinity declares that God is three in one: God the Father, Jesus as God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three persons are still the same God. Each person of the Trinity is as much a part of the other persons as it is of itself. The Council of Florence describes this interrelationship: "Because of this unity the Father is fully in the Son, fully in the Holy Spirit; the Son is fully in the Father, fully in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is fully in the Father, fully in

²¹ Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 4.

²² Information on the Council of Nicea and the Nicene Creed is taken from *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson, 2002). The entirety of the Nicene Creed was not formulated until after the Council of Constantinople in 381 C.E. The correct title of this creed should then be the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which was shortened for practicality.

the Son.”²³ The Trinity is kataphatic because it describes what God is. For example, God is “the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” All of the ideas alluding to the Trinity are assigned to God.

Karl Rahner describes the Trinity as the divinity that exists forever even beyond history. “The one self-communication of the one God occurs in three different manners of given-ness. One God subsists in three distinct manners of existing.”²⁴ For him the term “Father” refers to God as the “unoriginate,” that is to say the one that has no origin.²⁵ In these few words God is seen as a father figure with infinite might who created heaven and earth. At the same time that God is described as being the Father, one must always remember that God is the Son and Holy Spirit as well. Similar descriptions of Jesus as God’s Son and the Holy Spirit contribute additional attributes to God through the doctrine of the Trinity.

Jesus describes God as “Abba” 170 times in the New Testament.²⁶ Therefore, describing Jesus as the Son of God seems rational. Since Christians are all also seen as children of God, does this mean that Jesus is their brother? The doctrine of the Trinity recognizes Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and the “only begotten Son” of God. Therefore, it could be argued that Jesus is not on the same level as humans, but is in a totally different sphere in which He is of

²³This quotation from the Council of Florence is taken from Jürgen Moltmann’s discussion of the feminine aspects of the Holy Trinity found in the introduction to his book, *History and the Triune God*, (New York: Crossroads, 1992), xv.

²⁴Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 109.

²⁵In order to understand fully Rahner’s theology of the Trinity, see section three of his book, *The Trinity*, beginning on page 80, cited above.

²⁶Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, 10.

one substance with the Father. Jesus is born from God, but not created by God as is the rest of humanity.²⁷

Just because Jesus is the firstborn does not mean that Christians cannot be in sisterhood and brotherhood with Him. The idea of the firstborn Brother needs to be developed along with the idea of the Sonship of Jesus. It is through this brotherhood and sisterhood with the First born that the faithful are called to conform to Christ through the ideas of the Protestant Reformers.²⁸ The idea of being siblings of Christ calls believers to experience things similar to Jesus' experiences. Thus, when Jesus suffers all suffer, but when He rejoices, all should rejoice as well. Through His greatest suffering humanity has its greatest joy, while also suffering with Him. The idea of the Holy Trinity operates best if Jesus is seen as an extension of God the Father and the Holy Spirit while being seen as a Brother to humanity who sacrifices for each of His sisters and brothers.

The Spirit is the active person of the Holy Trinity today. The Spirit can also be the link between God the Father and God the Son. When Jesus was baptized, it was the Holy Spirit that descended upon Him; this same Spirit lies within each person of faith today. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit liberates humans. The Spirit is defined in several manners within Christianity, each with differing methods of linking the Spirit through the Father and Son.²⁹ What is present in each method is the doctrine of the Trinity.

²⁷Ibid., 37.

²⁸Ibid., 40.

²⁹Moltmann describes two distinct ways of how the Trinity as a whole is one monotheistic God. He uses monarchical and Eucharistic Trinities to show how the Spirit is a part of the eternal God on pages 68 and 69 of *History and the Triune God*. The monarchical is seen in that the Father creates through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharistic Trinity is a reversal of the monarchical; all activity proceeds from the Spirit.

The Holy Trinity is not something easily defined. By experiencing God as these specific persons, the Church struggles to find ways in which the true essence of God can be encompassed. By limiting God through kataphatic categories such as the Holy Trinity, wrestling with created doctrines about God becomes the inherent downfall of kataphatic theology. People focus on these doctrines instead of focusing on God and relationships with God.

Throughout history God has continuously been given attributes. From the earliest mention in the Hebrew Bible through articles, books, and homilies written today, God is being described. Descriptions of God have caused misunderstandings about who God is and about the relationship between God and creation. Being concerned with describing God too much, which can occur in kataphatic theology, leads some to think that who God really is and relationships with this God cannot be fully understood. God then becomes indescribable, which is the basis of apophatic theology.

Mysticism

Apophatic theology occurs in many forms; one such form is mysticism. Mysticism is not unique to Christianity. Throughout and across history mysticism has been one way to relate to the divine. A chief characteristic is its claim of making an immediate contact with the divine.³⁰ Christian mystics often articulate visions and contact with God, through which they experience God. Instead of describing who God is, mystics seek to experience God and then express these experiences. While attempting to express these experiences can be of some merit, ultimately describing these experiences is almost as difficult as describing God. Therefore, mystics might

³⁰Sidney Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religions*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 1.

say that retelling their experience is nearly impossible. Only those with similar experiences can begin truly to understand a mystical encounter with God.

There are a wide variety of means within Christian mysticism through which to relate to God. Mystics use a type of apophatic theology because of a need to experience God instead of describe God. Aghananda Bharati is quoted in Harvey D. Egan's article on the relationship between Eastern and Western mysticism stating that the mystical experience is a "zero experience" and "beyond symbol" as a type of monism.³¹ When people experience God they often claim to become one with God and thus have divine characteristics.³² Mysticism is one example of a way that God cannot be described but should rather be experienced. Describing God takes away from the oneness felt with God. Since words and descriptions cannot tell the whole story of God or experiences with God, mystics teach that an attempt should be made to experience the presence of God. Within that experience one can begin to describe God while understanding that such descriptions will always fall short.

Both kataphatic and apophatic theology initially appear to stand on their own without each other. However, most of the time, the two approaches require one another. In kataphatic theology God often loses the ability to be more than a construction of our language and humanity. Returning to ideas seen in the Council of Nicea and the Holy Trinity, God has been described for centuries as God the Father. The idea supporting this is that God has characteristics similar to those of a father figure, such as being the head of the "household," providing for the family, and making important decisions. But what happens when someone's

³¹ Monism is the doctrine that all of reality is a unified whole and can be described using a single concept or system. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., (2000), s.v. "Monism."

³² Harvey D. Egan, "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 39, no. 3, (1978): 400.

relationship to one's father does not contain these characteristics? The analogy of God as father is inadequate for everyone unless God the Father means something entirely different than the human father relationship. The analogy of God the Father does not have the same depth for all, so the emphasis placed upon the analogy can be too great. Even if the idea of God being the Father is appreciated, it must still be admitted that there is more to God than this simple comparison. There must be a new understanding of the term God the Father.

A new understanding of the term God the Father needs apophatic theology to assist kataphatic theology. By serving as a reminder that God cannot be limited by analogies or other relationships, apophatic theology seeks the true essence of God. In response to the analogy of God the Father, a theology that uses ideas from both apophatic and kataphatic theology would say that God does have fatherly characteristics, but God is the ultimate, perfect father. By keeping in mind the kataphatic idea of God the Father, Who God is can be illuminated. The kataphatic approach needs the apophatic approach to realize the true essence of God beyond just God as Father.

Maryology

Apophatic theology needs kataphatic theology in similar ways. When God becomes too abstract through apophatic theology, humans experience difficulty relating to God. Therefore, kataphatic theology is needed to offset apophatic theology. There are times when Jesus' divinity is emphasized to such an extreme that humans look for other means of relating to God. The Roman Catholic Church, as well as other branches of Christian faith, at times relates to God through Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the early Church Mary was not seen as an intercessor.

The main references to Mary were as the “new Eve.”³³ Within this role Mary is the one through whom humanity can be saved and return to its original state before the fall in the Garden of Eden. Mary is viewed as having all the qualities of goodness within her. According to Luke 1:28 Mary found favor with God and because of this gave birth to the Savior of all humanity. In a similar manner Eve is often portrayed as the person through whom sin entered the world.³⁴

While references to Mary as the “new Eve” continue today, the introduction of prayers to Mary originated in the fourth century in northern Africa and quickly spread throughout Christendom. Through these prayers, Mary at times had a divine role. In 600 C.E. prayers to Mary contained the words, “Holy Mary Mother of God.” The recitation of the rosary, which includes these words, dates back to the thirteenth century and has been a central part of the Catholic faith since that time. Within the rosary, ten prayers are directed toward Mary for every one prayer directed at God. The veneration of Mary has not decreased in the modern Catholic Church.³⁵ Her elevation seems to be greatest when Jesus’ humanity is forgotten. While official doctrines of the Catholic Church do not portray Mary as the intermediary or intercessor between humans and the divine, portraying Mary in these manners at times occurs in popular practice.

Mary is also referred to as the “Mother of God.” This notion has led some people to view Mary as a Co-Redeemer with Christ. While this title is dangerous, it is nonetheless attributed to her by Popes and other theologians as recently as 1918 when Pope Benedict XV wrote that “one

³³Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary-The Feminine Face of the Church*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 53.

³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 150-152. While Ruether does not agree with the idea that evil and sin entered the world through Eve, she does make reference to it here to explain the way in which many people often see Mary as the one who helped bring an end to the era of sin ushered in by Eve.

³⁵ “Maryology,” *Foundations Magazine*, September-October 1996, 5-16, <http://www.acts2.com/thebibletruth/MARYOLOGY.htm>.

may truly declare that Mary has redeemed the human race together with Christ.”³⁶ What Semmelroth believes statements such as this mean is that Mary is in co-operation with redemption as she is a receptive and active example of Christ’s work in the world through grace. Mary is the most holy of all humanity; in other words, she is as close to being divine as is humanly possible.³⁷

Since Mary is so close to being divine, she is often pushed over the edge into being divine. Two main reasons explain this phenomenon. The first is that people lose sight of Mary’s humanity, while being caught up in her role in the life of Christ. This first reason has little to do with the dialectic of apophatic and kataphatic theology. The second explanation of how Mary can become deified is when the space between humanity and God becomes too great for believers. When this occurs, it is necessary for something or someone to bridge the gap in order to have a method of reaching God. If it appears that God will not or cannot meet believers in an earthly place and believers cannot reach the divinity of God through human means, then someone like Mary often assumes divine qualities to fill this void.

The example of Mary illuminates the problems that arise when God is described too exclusively with apophatic theology. When God becomes too abstract, God becomes difficult to relate to. When this occurs, other means of relating to God, such as Mary’s deification, are created. Therefore, kataphatic theology is needed to offset the apophatic ideal to avoid this problem. If God is not accessible to humans, another vehicle of relating to God will be employed, or humans will give up their relationship with God. God needs to be described with human and non-human characteristics so that God may be accessible. Kataphatic theology can

³⁶Otto Semmelroth, *Mary the Archetype of the Church*, trans. by Mariavon Eroes and John Devlin, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 71.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 88.

serve as the method of describing God in human terms. By using the same words to describe God and humans the analogy found in Genesis 1:27 of being made in the image of God as both male and female is expanded.³⁸

It may appear that apophatic theology is not a very useful tool when describing God. To talk about God is to use kataphatic theology. This statement is true, but apophatic theology must be used within kataphatic theology in order to cleanse kataphatic theology of unwanted problems. The dialectic of apophatic and kataphatic theology is necessary so that the framework within which God should be described may be understood. As is the case with any dialectic, the tension between apophatic and kataphatic theology is seen from one's position on the continuum between the two poles. If someone uses more kataphatic ideas to describe God, then one who is in the middle between the two poles may be seen as very apophatic. This same person in the middle from the viewpoint of an apophatic person, may appear too kataphatic. Due to the hermeneutics of each person's position on this continuum, caution must be used when placing ideas and people at specific points on it. Therefore, the dialectic between these two theologies is a creative tension describing what God is and what God is not.

The dialectic of apophatic and kataphatic theology can be beneficial when trying to describe how to use language about God in today's world. By better understanding this dialectic as a creative tension within discussions about God language the two poles complement each other. Human language has inherent problems when talking about God. The inherent problem

³⁸I recognize that there has been considerable scholarly work done on this specific verse and those surrounding it. Within this context I simply wish to acknowledge that God has created humans as both male and female within the divine order that God has laid out as a part of the master plan of creation. For a better understanding of this see Phyllis Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them: Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood"-Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. Richard Hess and David Tsumura, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 329-361.

of making God too concrete can be overcome if the dialectic of apophatic and kataphatic theology is applied. Where a proper tension between the two extremes exists, God can be described.

The apophatic extreme—Sebastian Frank

The apophatic approach has been used to describe God for millennia, and has useful purposes, as well as some limitations. By looking at a theologian whose theology is near the apophatic end of the dialectic, the strengths and weakness of this theology will become apparent. The chosen theologian for this evaluation describes God through his mystic ideals about God.

Sebastian Frank was one of the earliest Protestant mystics, living in the first half of the sixteenth century. Frank's beliefs come close to representing the extreme of pure apophatic theology. He believed that God was above all notions and all definitions. In Frank's theology the only assertions that could be made about God were those that describe what God is not. It was only through individuals experiencing God that God was personal since no knowledge about God could be obtained. For Frank, God was the source and essence of everything. Being the source and essence of creation was the way the transcendent God related to the world. All aspects of God were eternal and beyond the scope of human thought.³⁹

Frank is apophatic in nearly every sense of the word. The only way that Frank is not apophatic is that he attempts to describe God with words. By proclaiming that God is eternal and beyond all understanding, Frank serves as an extremely apophatic theologian who only describes what God is not.

³⁹Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religions*, 274-275.

The kataphatic extreme—C. F. W. Walther

In contrast with Frank, many of the thoughts of C. F. W. Walther are near the kataphatic end of the spectrum. Walther's beliefs on the Scriptures and Lutheranism are very concrete. He believes the Scriptures are God's Word. As a result of this belief his observations about the Lord's Supper follow traditional Lutheran understanding:

One who sincerely believes that Holy Scripture is God's Word and that Christ is God and man in one person cannot do otherwise than believe also the word: 'This is My body,' is the truth and that God-man . . . desires and is able to impart His humanity assumed into His deity.⁴⁰

At times called the "Luther of America," Walther was recognized for his faith in Christ, allegiance to God's Word of Law and Gospel, and adherence to the Lutheran Confessions.⁴¹ The first president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Walther believed that all pastors, teachers, and professors should subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran confessions, in order that these leaders would not misguide the laity through false teachings.⁴²

Initially, it may appear that Walther is not kataphatic, but uses reasoning and understanding to come to conclusions about faith in God. However, Walther clung so tightly to the beliefs of Luther that he had little to no freedom to interpret for himself. What he did not find in the foundational documents of Lutheranism or in the writings of Luther, Walther appealed to Scripture for, following Luther's example. He attempted to return Lutheranism to its roots. If Walther saw some aspects of Lutheranism today, including those trusting feelings,

⁴⁰ C. F. W. Walther, *Editorials from 'Lehre und Wehre,'* trans. by Herbert J. A. Bouman, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 23.

⁴¹ Arthur H. Drevlow, ed., *C. F. W. Walther: The American Luther*, (Mankato, MN: Walther Press, 1987).

⁴² C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of our Church?" trans. by A. W. C. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18, (1947), 241-53.

emotions and works, he would say these aspects were not Lutheran and give the title a misrepresentation.⁴³ Walther was kataphatic by using only the Lutheran confessions and Scriptures to describe God. For him Lutheranism rooted in Scripture was the only way to understand God.

After describing the apophatic and kataphatic extremes as well as viewing examples of the two concepts needing each other, the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic is more thoroughly understood. With this greater understanding it can be seen that in order to best understand God, apophatic and kataphatic theology need to work together in a creative tension.

This tension is best achieved through a theology that continually exhibits traits of all aspects of the dialectic. Frank and Walther are examples of the problems inherent in ignoring either the kataphatic or apophatic aspects of God language. When one means of viewing God is absent, the tension disappears. Without the tension, God language becomes stale and too simplistic. The tension creates an avenue of meaningful discussion, which is necessary for the best understanding of who God is and who God is not. One example of apophatic and kataphatic theology being held in tension is Thomas Aquinas and his theology that vacillates between the extremes. Another example is the Eastern Church and its unique definition of apophatic theology, which transcends Western understanding of apophatic and kataphatic theology.

Vacillating between Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology—Thomas Aquinas

After viewing theologians from both ends of the spectrum, the next step in comprehending the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic is to turn to an example of two extremes

⁴³ Glenn Reichwald, "If Walther Were Alive Today," in *C. F. W. Walther: The American Luther; Essays in the Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of Carl Walther's Death*, ed. Arthur H. Drevlow, (Mankato, MN: Walther Press, 1987), 187.

meeting in the middle. Thomas Aquinas displayed both apophatic and kataphatic ideas within his own theology. According to Gregory P. Rocca of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Religion at Berkeley, Thomas was one of the few individuals who successfully “hovered over the abyss” between these extreme ideas about theology.⁴⁴ Thomas did so through weaving “analogy and incomprehensibility” together.⁴⁵

It would appear that Thomas uses apophatic ideas when discussing God. After all in his *Summa Theologica* he states, “we can use no words at all to refer to God.”⁴⁶ To Thomas God has no definition, has no means of being pointed to due to a lack of availability to human senses, and has no attributes similar to those that understood by humans.⁴⁷ Therefore, God cannot be talked of literally but only through metaphor, and even metaphor cannot adequately describe God. God must be described using apophatic theology.

Thomas’s apophatic theology has three aspects.⁴⁸ The first aspect is that God cannot be described with any quality that is not perfect. Since, according to Thomas, no quality can be perfect through human understanding, none can be used to describe God.⁴⁹ Next to the first notion of all qualities being imperfect is the second that the negation of attributes implies what

⁴⁴Gregory P. Rocca, “Aquinas on God-talk: Hovering over the Abyss,” *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4, (1993): 641-661.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 642.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ed. Thomas Gilbey (New York: London and McGrawHill Book Company, 1964), 1.13.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸Rocca, *Aquinas on God-Talk*: 648. Here Rocca explains the ways in which Aquinas is a negative theologian with references to his own more specific argumentation about each aspect of negative theology.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.2.

God is not so that God cannot be correlated with human attributes. Rocca uses the example that if God is described as good, the word “good” is used in a completely different sense than when using it to describe a human being. The third part of Thomas’s apophatic theology demonstrates that any attributes given to God are identical to the divine nature of God. Therefore, what is said about God is not really what is meant because humans cannot understand what is said about the divine. Rocca summarizes these three aspects of Thomas’ apophatic theology in the following way:

First we deny of him all corporeal things; and next, we even deny intellectual things as they are found in all creatures, like goodness and wisdom, and then there remains in our understanding only the fact that God exists, and nothing further, so that it suffers a kind of confusion. Lastly, however, we even remove from him his very existence, as it is in creatures, and then our understanding remains in a certain darkness of ignorance.⁵⁰

Through this understanding Thomas is shown to be an apophatic thinker. Since God cannot be described, then it appears that Thomas formulated many concepts about something that could not be written about. The fact that he wrote about God is where the kataphatic Thomas begins to be understood. While Thomas holds that nothing can be described perfectly enough by humans to be a part of God, humans can only understand things in their own human terms and must acknowledge that there is a more perfect form of all things that preexists with God.⁵¹ All things preexist in a more perfect form than can be imagined.⁵² Through the idea of the perfect attribute God can begin to be described.⁵³

⁵⁰ Rocca, *Aquinas on God-Talk*, 648-649.

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.5

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.13.6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.13.9.

If one were to look at the two conflicting sides of Thomas without further analysis it would seem that he was not being consistent. Therefore, all the ideas attributed to Thomas would need to be discarded. But Thomas did not stop here. Thomas holds conflicting ideas together through analogy. Analogy is the “only possible way to understand . . . what takes place in our talk about God.”⁵⁴ According to Rocca, Thomas uses analogy as the primary means of remaining true to God being above comprehension while still describing God. Within his writings Thomas demonstrates that God is simple and yet incomprehensible. These two opposing thoughts lead Thomas to write that God cannot be beyond explanation, nor can God be easily understood. Only through wrestling with thoughts about creation and relating creation back to God can one obtain an understanding of God beyond merely knowing what God is not.⁵⁵ One example of this concept from Rocca is that according to Thomas individuals “know the truth that God exists without knowing what the divine existence is in itself.”⁵⁶

The essence of Thomas’s analogy holding apophatic and kataphatic ideas together is that Thomas, on a foundational level, is a kataphatic scholar with apophatic concepts building upon this foundation. When God is described, it must always be remembered that the statements made about God do not give insight into the true nature of God. Any talk about God is viewed through the hermeneutic of faith.⁵⁷ Whenever one discusses God, the faith of the person must be remembered as a vital part of that person’s contribution. Faith needs kataphatic ideals as a basis

⁵⁴Rocca, *Aquinas on God-talk*, 654.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 656.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 658.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 661.

while always remembering the apophatic essence of God. For both Thomas and believers today, God's true nature cannot be discussed, but an understanding of God can begin through faith.

Transcending Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology—The Eastern Church

The analogies of Thomas are one way in which apophatic and kataphatic theology can be held together. The Eastern Church views these two ideas, not as being separated by a large middle ground, but as two ideas that are side-by-side and function together. The Eastern Church looks at apophatic theology differently from the manner in which it has been viewed thus far. Instead of saying what God is not, it says that God transcends theology.⁵⁸ To the Eastern Church, God is even above describing what God is not. The foundation of theology is toward the apophatic end of the dialectic while the kataphatic end is used to build upon the apophatic approach. In essence it reverses the roles found in Thomas. Within the Eastern Church, "God's essence is completely transcendent, incommunicable, and unknowable, but God's activity is immanent, communicable and conceivable."⁵⁹ Basically God, who is uncreated, is beyond the comprehension of any created being, including humankind.⁶⁰

Since no human can fully comprehend the true essence of God, there is a different understanding of the relationship between God and humans in the Eastern Church. There is more to faith than to understand God and to be saved by God through faith based upon this understanding of God. In the East an additional goal of being deified is added to the principles

⁵⁸ Marios P. Begzos, "Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory," trans. Harold H. Oliver, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 41, no. 4 (1996): 328.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of understanding and faith. Deified does not mean mixing with God, but becoming one with God. "God became man in order that man may become God."⁶¹ When trying to conceptualize God in human terms often what can occur is that God is misunderstood, which leads to idolatry of God. By having the goal of becoming one with God, this mistake cannot be made. Instead the focus becomes a search for truth through God. The search for truth leads one to being a participant in one's own salvation. While the idea of works is not central in the Eastern Church, humans can participate and seek oneness with God, and can find God through seeking this oneness in experiences and creation.⁶² The continual searching is one aspect of faith that separates the Eastern Church from the Western Church.

Apophatic theology, defined by the Eastern Church, seeks to transcend all theology by holding itself above all positive and negative characteristics when describing God. This idea brings the Western understanding of kataphatic and apophatic theology together, and holds them up against a God that is not supposed to be described. God is to be upheld as our ideal striving point. Eastern theology thus demonstrates that the ends of the dialectic may not be that far apart. The ends may be brought together like the two ends of a string, which need to touch to create a circle in which concepts about faith and theology can continually revolve.

Through examples such as those of Thomas and the Eastern Church, it can be seen that apophatic theology and kataphatic theology need each other in order to function together toward the common goal of understanding God. Now that the dialectic of apophatic and kataphatic theology has been discussed, it can be applied to concepts about the gender of God language. It

⁶¹ Ibid., 344.

⁶² Ibid., 356.

will be shown that God may be finitely described while holding true to the idea that God is transcendent.

Benefiting from the Tension—Concluding Thoughts

Through all the ideas presented it can be observed that describing God is not a simple task. No matter how much one wants to pinpoint who God is, something is missing. Attempts at describing God have also led to great struggles for others in their relationships with God. For a multitude of reasons, some individuals have concluded that God cannot be described. For these individuals God needs to be experienced as Godself without human attempts at rationalizing specifics about who God is. While this idea is beneficial for some, others cannot experience God without knowing more about the divine. Beginning to realize these things, one wonders how humans should use this knowledge for greater understanding of their relationship with God and one another.

Solutions to such difficult problems are not easily obtained. However, the concepts discussed earlier may begin to solve these problems. Using the apophatic and kataphatic dialectic it becomes apparent that however one describes God, one must also remember that God is beyond human descriptions. These descriptions benefit humans by making God concrete enough for one's relationship with God to be strengthened. Through understanding this dialectic the question arises as to the methods employed to remind one of the transcendent nature of God. Some of the scholars discussed in the chapter, "Voicing Concerns about God Language Today," use metaphor as a reminder. Fretheim's reminder states that language about God is a metaphor and thus should not be taken literally. Tribble uses male and female imagery in the Bible as symbols and metaphors for God to remind humans that gendered language is metaphorical.

Lott and Maluso show gender as a social construct and thus a human creation. The use of gendered language when describing God then becomes a social construction as well. In the broadest sense all language is socially constructed and must be used metaphorically when

describing a God who is beyond human construction. Whenever discussing God it must be remembered that language is a metaphor and gender a social construct. If these concepts are forgotten or ignored then God is placed inside of a humanly constructed box. This box limits God to being described through concretely defined human ideas and concepts. God is beyond human limitations and conceptions. The only limitations that may be placed on God are those God places on Godself. These limits define who God is, but on God's terms and not on human terms.

It seems that no matter the starting point, whether it be apophatic theology or kataphatic theology, one finds a dead end when describing either what God is not or what God is. For this reason one needs these theologies to compliment one another while being in tension with one another in order to avoid dead ends. The tension between apophatic and kataphatic concepts is a vital aspect of discussion about God language. When describing God or not describing God, one can steer oneself from moving to either extreme and encountering dead ends by being aware of the other extreme.

Tension between apophatic and kataphatic theology also helps one remember that language about God is metaphorical and that gender is socially constructed. God is and will never be easily described. When God descriptions come too easily, often something is missing or it is forgotten that God language is metaphorical and gender a social construct. In recognizing that God descriptions can be too easily obtained and that finding the missing parts of the tension is necessary, one can correct one's understanding of God as well as the understanding of others. Those in dialogue about God need each other for the fullest understanding of who God is. Through this dialogue with each other, tensions in God language can remain which benefit all

members of the discussion. God can then be described to the best of human understanding and simultaneously remaining beyond understanding.

By returning to concerns about God language today, one can visualize how the apophatic and kataphatic tension may become the avenue for meaningful discussion. Each individual discussed illuminates difficulties in describing God. These difficulties cannot all be solved simplistically. One concrete method of describing God will not encompass all these difficulties. Therefore, a plethora of avenues through which to describe God becomes vital. The apophatic and kataphatic dialectic is the appropriate avenue through which difficulties in describing God can be minimized. When apophatic and kataphatic theology are used in tension with one another, God is described and defined to the best of human capabilities.

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