

To what extent is the mysticism of the Life of Teresa of Ávila apophatic?

Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda, better known to us as Teresa of Ávila (1515¹ - 1582²) was a Spanish mystic, writer, and reformer of the Carmelite Order. The author of a number of works of spiritual advice, Teresa also wrote an autobiography, her *Life*, between 1562 and 1565³ where she describes her spiritual journey and four stages of prayer which lead the believer into union with God.

In this essay, I would like to explore the degree to which the mystical theology in Teresa's *Life* can be described as apophatic, or negative, in nature.

Apophatic⁴ theology is defined as "the encounter with the failure of what we must say about God to represent God adequately."⁵ Apophatic theology is "that speech about God which is the failure of speech,"⁶ and stresses the fundamental unknowability of God, the inadequacy of all assertions and descriptions of him leading, ultimately, to silence in the face of God who entirely "transcends our language"⁷. The obverse side of the theological coin is kataphatic, or positive theology⁸ which "asserts what God is, although always assuming God is this and *more*".⁹

Apophatic theology is perhaps most associated with Denys the Areopagite¹⁰, a pseudonymous 6th century writer whose work "exercised an enormous influence on the...mystical tradition of the mediaeval West".¹¹ Some medieval mystics followed Denys in using a formal dialectic of katphasis and apophasis, affirming and negating statements about God in order to "step off the very boundary of language itself",¹² while others used a less formal form of apophasis, in "a formation of the self in suffering...under the weight of the divine presence".¹³ Both techniques end,

¹ Bilinkoff, Jodi. *The Avila of Saint Teresa : Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), p109

² *Ibid.*, p146

³ Williams, Rowan. *Teresa of Avila*. Outstanding Christian Thinkers. (London: Continuum, 2000), p42

⁴ Also referred to as negative theology or the *via negativa*

⁵ Davies, Oliver, and Denys Turner. *Silence and the Word : Negative Theology and Incarnation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p18

⁶ Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God : Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p20

⁷ Turner, Denys, p42

⁸ Also referred to as the *via positiva*

⁹ Mujica, Barbara. "Beyond Image: The Apophatic-Kataphatic Dialectic in Teresa De Avila." *Hispania: A Journal Devoted to the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese* 84, no. 4 (2001): 741-48, p741

¹⁰ Also known as Pseudo-Dionysius

¹¹ Louth, Andrew. *Denys the Areopagite*. Outstanding Christian Thinkers. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), p2

¹² Davies, Oliver, and Denys Turner, p20

¹³ *Ibid.*, p2

finally, in silence, in a “direct, personal awareness of the presence of God”.¹⁴ Ultimately, as Denys Turner asserts¹⁵, apophatic and kataphatic theology both are and should be used together in order to “show...by means of language that which lies beyond language”¹⁶ and so “therefore, the question we should be asking is not which thinker is apophatic and which kataphatic, but rather, what is the degree of *apophasis* present in the thought of a given writer.”¹⁷

This essay will focus on the elements of apophatic thought in the two figures Teresa describes as influencing her, Francisco de Osuna and Augustine of Hippo, before moving on to discuss apophatic elements in the four stages of prayer which Teresa sets out in her *Life*.

Fray Francisco de Osuna (b. during the 1490s¹⁸, d. before April 1542¹⁹) was a Franciscan friar and author of a six-part work called the Spiritual Alphabet (*Abecedario Espiritual*), whose third volume was published first, in 1527,²⁰ and which became one of the most popular works of its time.²¹ Teresa of Avila was introduced to his *Third Spiritual Alphabet* in 1538²², and mentions using his book as a guide to prayer, achieving its highest stages, albeit with difficulty.²³

In his *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, Osuna uses numerous historical figures, including Augustine,²⁴ to teach the practice of recollection (*recogimiento*): the gathering together of all the senses and faculties, detaching them from outside distractions in order to concentrate upon God, leading ultimately to a spiritual union with God.²⁵ His book aimed to guide the reader through three ascending stages of prayer, gradually “moving from outward to inward, from words to silence, directing the person’s attention to his or her heart.”²⁶ These stages begin with vocal prayer, before moving on to mental prayer with meditation, sustaining “holy thoughts” using images of Christ²⁷. His final stage is the prayer of quiet, where the soul has moved beyond words, beyond images, to an

¹⁴ Mujica, Barbara, p743

¹⁵ See also Turner, Denys, p33

¹⁶ Turner, Denys, p34

¹⁷ Carabine, Deirdre. "Negative Theology in the Thought of Saint Augustine." *Recherches De Théologie Ancienne Et Médiévale* 59 (1992): 5-22, p6

¹⁸ Possibly in 1492 or 1497 (Reinsch, Andrew. *Recogimiento and the Memory of God*, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p28)

¹⁹ Wolcott, Bradley. “*The Flame That Enkindles All*”: Francisco De Osuna, the Exercise of Recollection, and the Overarching Law of Love, 2007, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p16

²⁰ DePrinzio, Kevin. *Your Word Pierced My Heart, and I Fell in Love: Teresa of Avila's Reading of Augustine of Hippo's Confessions*, 2017, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p148

²¹ Whitehill, Paul. *At the Origins of Spanish Golden Age Mysticism: “Recogimiento” in the “Tercer Abecedario Espiritual” of Francisco De Osuna*, 2005, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p1

²² Bilinkoff, Jodi, p116

²³ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen. *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p35

²⁴ Whitehill, Paul, p37

²⁵ Whitehill, Paul, p3

²⁶ DePrinzio, Kevin, p151

²⁷ Williams, Rowan, p48

experience of God which cannot be described, where the soul “understands without understanding the source of his understanding”.²⁸

As Paul Whitehill²⁹ has observed Osuna’s three stages of prayer show the influence of, and correspond to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of mystical theology as set out by Denys.³⁰ It is in his advocacy of a gradual ascent, “stripping away...all anthropomorphic representations of God”,³¹ leading finally to a wordless and imageless experience of God in the heart that we can see the influence of apophatic theology in Osuna’s writing.³²

A second figure whom Teresa identifies as an important influence on her life, is Augustine of Hippo. Teresa read his *Confessions* shortly after the spiritual crisis which led to her “reconversion” in 1555³³, and she writes in her *Life* that “when I began to read the *Confessions* I seemed to see myself portrayed there.”³⁴

Augustine’s *Confessions* is “an exercise in autobiographical theology”³⁵ which Teresa would later imitate in the writing of her own *Life*³⁶ and which details his own conversion and his interior ascent to encounter God in the heart.³⁷ Augustine stresses the inadequacy of human language to describe God and, in his “song of unlikeness”³⁸ at the beginning of the *Confessions*, describes God in a series of soaring paradoxical analogies before finally concluding that “even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you.”³⁹ While Augustine does not use a formal kataphatic-apophatic dialectic, nor is his an “explicitly developed apophatic theology”⁴⁰ his use of a “superfluity of...affirmativeness...[until it] collapses into...silence”⁴¹ is part of what reveals his place within the apophatic tradition.⁴²

A significant moment in Augustine’s *Confessions* occurs when he is with his mother, Monica, in a garden in Ostia. Monica and Augustine’s conversation about the “whole compass of

²⁸ Francisco de Osuna, quoted in Wolcott, Bradley, p39

²⁹ Whitehill, Paul, p3

³⁰ See Louth, Andrew, p40

³¹ Tsoukatos, Elaini. *Finding God in All Things: Teresa of Ávila's Use of the Familiar*, 2011, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, p8

³² See Tsoukatos, Elaini, p8; Wolcott, Bradley, p40

³³ Bilinkoff, Jodi, p118

³⁴ Avila, St Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p69

³⁵ Kenney, John Peter. “Mystic and Monk: Augustine and the Spiritual Life” in Reid, Shelley., and Mark. Vessey. *A Companion to Augustine*. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p286

³⁶ Turner, Denys, p51

³⁷ Turner, Denys, p79

³⁸ Conybeare, Catherine. “Reading the *Confessions*” in Reid, Shelley, and Mark Vessey, p106

³⁹ *Confessions* I, 4 in Augustine, and R. S. Pine-Coffin. *Confessions*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1961, 2015), p5

⁴⁰ Carabine, Deirdre. “Negative Theology in the Thought of Saint Augustine.” *Recherches De Théologie Ancienne Et Médiévale* 59 (1992): 5-22, p13

⁴¹ Davies and Turner, p22

⁴² Carabine, Deidre, p17

material things”⁴³ leads them on an ascent which results in an encounter with eternal Wisdom, and is followed by a discussion on “silenc[ing] the tumult of the flesh and the images of earth, sea, air and the heavens, whereby through silencing all the works of God, including the self, one would be able to hear the voice of God”.⁴⁴ Deidre Carabine identifies this moment as an expression of the apophatic method of *aphairesis*; that “God is better known by knowing what he is not”.⁴⁵

While Augustine’s *Confessions* does not “immediately confront the reader with an explicitly developed apophatic theology”,⁴⁶ his emphasis on the inadequacy of language to describe God, and his emphasis on the “hiddenness” of the God of whom he says that “we cannot comprehend”⁴⁷ show that “the degree of negative theology found in Augustine’s thought is certainly not minimal”.⁴⁸

The influence of both Augustine and Francisco de Osuna can be discerned within Teresa of Avila’s *Life*, particularly within her stages of prayer and her discussion of union with God. While Teresa wrote numerous works,⁴⁹ her *Life* “represent[s] one specific moment in Teresa’s development”.⁵⁰ It was written at the behest of her confessors and the final version was completed by 1565. It was sent to numerous people and, by 1574, had been given to the Inquisition, staying in their files until after Teresa’s death, giving her “no opportunity of further revision”.⁵¹ As well as an account of her childhood, adolescence, profession as a nun, her “reconversion”, and the founding of the first Discalced Carmelite convent, the *Life* sets out what Teresa calls her “mystical theology”,⁵² a term borrowed from Osuna, who himself borrowed it from Denys.⁵³

After discussing her childhood, Teresa moves on to talk about taking the habit in a relaxed Carmelite convent in 1536⁵⁴. Teresa was frequently ill, describing herself as “very sickly”⁵⁵, and it was during one of her illnesses that an uncle with whom she was staying introduced her to Osuna’s *Third Spiritual Alphabet*⁵⁶. It was then that she decided “to start on the way of prayer, with this book as my guide.”⁵⁷ She found the book difficult to follow, and had particular difficulty with the highest stage of Osuna’s prayers, which involved “renouncing...all symbols and images –

⁴³ *Confessions*, IX, 10 in Augustine, and R. S. Pine-Coffin, p286

⁴⁴ Carabine, Deidre, p14

⁴⁵ Carabine, Deidre, p14

⁴⁶ Carabine, Deidre, p5

⁴⁷ *Confessions* I, 4 in Augustine, and R. S. Pine-Coffin, p5

⁴⁸ Carabine, Deidre, p21

⁴⁹ Including the *Way of Perfection* and the *Interior Castle*, which represent her mature spiritual vision

⁵⁰ Williams, Rowan. *Teresa of Avila*. Outstanding Christian Thinkers. (London: Continuum, 2000), p43

⁵¹ Williams, Rowan, p43

⁵² Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p71; 77; 85; 122

⁵³ Williams, Rowan, p55

⁵⁴ Bilinkoff, Jodi, p112

⁵⁵ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p90

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p35

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p35

including the image of Jesus' humanity."⁵⁸ Regardless, she tells us that she was able to achieve the prayer of quiet, and union with God, though without understanding either of them.⁵⁹ Teresa was later troubled further illness, and feelings of alienation from God, and, as with a number of apophatic female mystics, "the experience of estrangement from God"⁶⁰ became central in her spiritual journey and later writing. Teresa experienced a significant spiritual breakthrough in 1555, when she experienced a collapse in front of an image of Christ, saying she "threw myself on the ground before Him in a great flood of tears,"⁶¹ and was then given a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*, "seemingly by the ordainment of the Lord."⁶² From that point, she was able to develop her own stages of prayer, which she included in the *Life* in its final revision.⁶³

Teresa sets out four stages of prayer, beginning with detaching oneself from the distractions of the world by "meditat[ing] on the life of Christ, [so that] the intellect will grow tired."⁶⁴ For Teresa, this is the only stage that can be practised, for all the others depend upon the initiative of God. In the second stage, "the soul begins to be recollected", and the person's own action at this point is restricted simply to surrendering the will to God,⁶⁵ which is now held captive, while the memory and understanding are still free. In the third stage, the mystic approaches union with God. "The faculties of the soul are asleep", and she experiences "a glorious bewilderment, a heavenly madness"⁶⁶, although she is still able to concentrate on things other than God, albeit with difficulty. In the fourth stage, the mystic enters into union with God, and experiences him in a way which is both indescribable and incomprehensible,⁶⁷ echoing Augustine's experience of the God whom we cannot fully understand. In union, "self-awareness itself is suspended, at least to the extent that, in prayer, it becomes quite impossible to verbalize what is going on, to be in any way distanced from what is happening."⁶⁸ Teresa also talks about a stage within union; elevation, or rapture. This is the "flight of the spirit"⁶⁹ to God, who says in the *Life* that the soul "dissolves utterly...it cannot comprehend what it understands, it understands by not understanding."⁷⁰

⁵⁸ Green, Deirdre. *Gold in the Crucible : Teresa of Avila and the Western Mystical Tradition*. (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1989), p65

⁵⁹ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p35

⁶⁰ Davies, Oliver, and Denys Turner, p104

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p67

⁶² *Ibid.*, p68

⁶³ McGinn, Bernard. "Teresa De Jesús the Contemplative in Action." *English Language Notes* 56, no. 1 (2018): 53-66, p59

⁶⁴ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p79

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p98

⁶⁶ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p112

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p122

⁶⁸ Williams, Rowan, p67

⁶⁹ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p124

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p127

In Teresa's stages of prayer, we may detect a critique of Francisco de Osuna. She "tacitly dismantles the orderly procession Osuna envisages so as to leave the initiative wholly with God,"⁷¹ and her prayer method varies somewhat from the usually imageless practice of apophysis,⁷² as she rejects Osuna's teaching that "recommended the abandonment of meditation on the sacred humanity for those who want to be 'perfect',"⁷³ saying that "while we live as human beings, it is very important for us to keep Christ's Humanity before us."⁷⁴

The value Teresa places on the image of Christ in his humanity may seem to show Teresa's rejection of apophaticism,⁷⁵ but, it is possible to argue that, in Teresa's writing "the apophatic and the cataphatic approaches to theology go hand in hand."⁷⁶ For Teresa, human "understanding is more of a hindrance than a help,"⁷⁷ and has no value in the higher stages of prayer,⁷⁸ and it is in those final stages that an apophatic element can be discerned. Like Augustine and Osuna, Teresa envisages a gradual progression of the soul towards God, a detachment or negation of all distractions which culminates in "a union in which all distinctions are lost."⁷⁹ In this union, Teresa has passed "beyond all form and image",⁸⁰ and describes "an experience in the understanding that might be described as an overloading of the circuits. Too much is coming into the understanding to be 'processed' in the ordinary way, and so there is a feeling of bafflement and stupidity."⁸¹ In the end of her progress towards God, Teresa is reduced to silence, inhabiting "an ineffable state which is beyond rational comprehension,"⁸² which words cannot convey, the silence in the face of the ineffable which is an inherent part of apophaticism.⁸³

In conclusion, Teresa of Ávila's mysticism is not primarily apophatic, and she does not draw out a formal exposition of the indescribability of the ineffable God, it is possible to trace some apophatic elements in her mystical theology. In this, she an heir to the apophatic tradition of Western mysticism, particularly as it was mediated through the fusion between Augustine and Denys the Areopagite⁸⁴ which was popular in the Middle Ages, and which also influenced

⁷¹ Williams, Rowan, p56

⁷² Green, Deidre p72

⁷³ Williams, Rowan, p70

⁷⁴ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p157

⁷⁵ Green, Deidre, p38

⁷⁶ Tsoukatos, Elaini, p147

⁷⁷ Avila, St. Teresa of., and J. M. Cohen, p92

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p113

⁷⁹ Turner, Denys, p142

⁸⁰ Green, Deidre, p67

⁸¹ Williams, Rowan, p55

⁸² Green, Deidre, p67

⁸³ Mujica, Barbara, p743

⁸⁴ Saak, Eric L. "Augustine in the Western Middle Ages to the Reformation" in Reid, Shelley., and Mark. Vessey. *A Companion to Augustine*. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p497 (see also Turner, Denys, pp48-9)

Francisco de Osuna, whose stages of prayer were both critiqued and adapted⁸⁵ by Teresa. It is within the final stages of prayer, where words, images, and reason are transcended to end in a direct experience of the God that we can see an element of apophaticism in the *Life* of Teresa of Ávila.

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⁸⁵ Whitehill, Paul, p92

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