

On Knowing God

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

God is unknowable, but He makes Himself known. Man, with his limited human abilities, cannot know God. He senses His existence, senses some of His attributes, and measures them from the created world, but he never comprehends Him, nor does he know Him with a true, existential knowledge, except through divine intervention and the revelation of His divine powers. This requires pure, righteous, and humble souls to see Him and respond to Him. God shines His light on the good and the evil, on the righteous and those He chooses, out of His mercy, for purposes that only He knows. “God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).

Man finds evidence of God; his intellect helps him see the paths that lead to Him. God is known through love. The proof of His existence is linked to the proof of His action in you and in the universe.

It was said in ancient times, “Show me your God. Show me the proof of your God.” The attributes of your God are seen through you. How do you behave, how do you act, how do you face the world? What are your morals? If you believe in God, obey Him, and act according to His commandments and His pleasures, then this is evident in your behavior in this world. The believer imitates his God. In Christianity, man is called to become the image of God. He was originally created in His image. Although this divine image was distorted by the fall of the first two ancestors from paradise, its traces still exist, and man, through Christ, can restore it and elevate it to its authentic divine beauty.

Christians have known, since ancient times, two ways of approaching God, which are simultaneously parallel and complementary. They spoke of Cataphatic affirmation, through deduction and analogy, and of Apophatic approach, through God’s transcendence of every attribute of creation.

In the first way, for example, you attribute the characteristic of beauty to God because you see beauty in creation, which He created, and to Him be glory. Thus, you see all goodness and virtue in this world and attribute it to God. You see

supreme mercy in a creature, and you say, "If a creature is capable of attaining this degree of mercy, then how great is God's mercy!"

This is a deductive, logical path that extends from creation to the Creator. Theologians have called it affirmative (Cataphatic) theology or positive theology.

The second method is called Apophatic theology. It is the opposite of affirmative theology. It proceeds from the premise that God is completely free from the limitations of His creation. Human justice, for example, is imperfect, but God cannot be imperfect. Consequently, His justice transcends human justice in a way that cannot be measured, known, or limited. Therefore, some have gone so far as to say that God has no justice when compared or measured with justice as humans understand it. This is because God's justice, which is unlimited and incomprehensible, leads us to deny Him justice, based on our imperfect and limited scale of human justice. This approach to God is called negative theology or theology of negation, because it denies every human attribute, no matter how good and beautiful, from God, considering Him, the Almighty, to be immeasurably superior to them.

Because man cannot directly understand God, he resorts to images and symbols to the extent that his mind and imagination can comprehend. Therefore, all speech about God is, in the end, symbolic, indirect, and human, carrying the human flavor and language that cannot encompass God.

It is mentioned in the biography of the Blessed Augustine that an angel, in the form of a boy, appeared to him while he was walking along the seashore, contemplating, with concentration and effort, the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the relationship of the divine persons to one another. The boy-angel was scooping water from the sea with his hands, placing it in a small hole he had made in the sand of the beach. When Augustine saw him, he said to him, "Don't you see the vastness and breadth of the sea? How can this small hole contain all this water?" The angel replied, "And how can your limited mind contain the infinite God?"

Because symbols, images, and human language are insufficient to express God's exceeding transcendence, as well as His difference from us, we need to use

negation to say what God is not, rather than what God is. The method of affirming attributes in God is parallel to the method of denying these attributes in Him.

Every human expression is only a limited depiction, despite its sincere intent. God remains a mystery. He transcends all that is human. When we speak of mystery, we mean, in the words of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, that something has become clear to our understanding, but we never fully comprehend it.

God in Christianity is the God known in the Bible as the God who continually reveals the works of His power to humans, enabling them to know Him for who He truly is. Therefore, many have called Christianity the religion of divine revelation, which began with God speaking to Abraham and ended with the divine incarnation in the person of Christ. We know God through Jesus Christ. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

From here, Orthodox theology distinguishes between the essence, nature, or identity of God, on the one hand, and His powers, works, or acts on the other.

The essence of God can never be comprehended, neither in this life nor in eternity. If we knew the essence of God, we would no longer be created beings. This is impossible for man, “God in the unapproachable light.” But He reveals His powers or acts of power to us when He comforts, guides, and directs us. We see His powers in the actions He accomplishes in us and in the world around us, His creation.

Saint Symeon the New Theologian says: “O invisible world, we see you. O intangible world, we touch you. O unknowable world, we know you. O imperceptible world, we grasp you.”

This requires spiritual eyes that see what is invisible to the eyes of the body alone. This is given to those whose passions have been softened by divine grace, enlightening their insight.

How, for example, can a hard-hearted person recognize acts of mercy? How can someone whose heart is blinded by jealousy see the good in others, while being torn apart by jealousy, passion, envy, and hatred?

To truly know God requires love, humility, and a keen sense of humanity. You know Him to the extent that you associate with Him, and He is present in you. You can only truly associate with Him if you are faithful, to the end, to His commandments and teachings, which He revealed to you in Jesus Christ.

The enlightened Saint Sophrony Zakharov says, "God can be known everywhere, because He is present everywhere. For man to possess this knowledge, schools and theological writings are absolutely not enough. But when He is present with us, true knowledge inexplicably penetrates our entire being."