



POETIC illustrations of the meaning of these terms are found in the works of the seventeenth-century British “metaphysical” poets (R. Crenshaw, J. Donne, G. Herbert, T. Traherne, and H. Vaughan), who often drew on two complementary strands of Christian mysticism.

THE *kataphatic* tradition (the “way of affirmation”) emphasizes beauty that is revealed and apparent, while the *apophatic* tradition (the “way of negation”) dwells on glory that remains concealed, hidden from view. Word-portraits of these contrasting approaches are found in two different poems by Henry Vaughan, the seventeenth-century British metaphysical poet. The first poem, *The World*, is kataphatic, portraying God and creation in images of light and brightness:

I SAW eternity the other night
 Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,
 All calm, as it was bright,
 And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
 Driv’n by the spheres
 Like a vast shadow mov’d, In which the world
 And all her train were hurl’d:

The World (Henry Vaughan 1621-1695)

THUS in the Christian *kataphatic* mystical tradition God is seen through the prism of “the many”: words, color, song, complexity, multiplicity of

images and ideas all intertwine, mutually illuminating one another while celebrating the richness of beauty experienced in diversity.

IN the *apophatic* strand of Christian mysticism, on the other hand, God is understood as “the One” - beyond words and images, transcending every category in a radical simplicity beyond all human thought and idea. God’s uniqueness and grandeur so overwhelm our senses and minds that God is described as solitary, radically simple; even as hidden, invisible, or “dark”. Thus Vaughan’s poem *The Night*:

THERE is in God (some say)
 A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here
 Say it is late and dusky, because they
 See not all clear
 O for that night! where I in him
 Might live invisible and dim.

IT is possible to characterize different Christian spiritual practices according to their tendency to emphasize one end of this spectrum or the other:

<p>THE KATAPHATIC TRADITION</p> <p><i>(The Way of Affirmation)</i></p> <p>[COMPLEX VARIETY; MULTIPLE IMAGES; LIGHT; LITERATURE; POETRY; HYMNODY]</p> <p>PUBLIC WORSHIP</p> <p><i>Sacramental & Scriptural Focus</i></p> <p>Vernacular Psalmody</p> <p>Liturgy of the Hours</p> <p>Ritual Chant</p> <p>Taizé, Gregor.Chant</p>	<p>THE APOPHATIC TRADITION</p> <p><i>(The Way of Negation)</i></p> <p>[SIMPLICITY, ABSENCE of IMAGES; DARKNESS; WORDLESS INTUITION; HUMILITY]</p> <p>MONOLOGISTIC (Private-) PRAYER</p> <p>The Jesus Prayer <i>(Hesychasm)</i></p> <p>Eastern Christian (Byzantine, Orthodox)</p>
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PRIVATE DEVOTION

Icon-Meditation;
Litanies
Stations of the Cross;
The Rosary

DISCURSIVE MEDITATION

Ignatian Sulpician,
Salesian

DISCERNMENT RETREAT

Ignatian Spirituality

The prayer of the
Cloud of Unknowing

“Centering Prayer”
(Basil Pennington
Thomas Keating)

“Christian Mantra”
(John Main,
Lawrence Freeman)

“Christian Zen”

“ABANDONMENT to
DIVINE PROVIDENCE”
(? Mindfulness ?)

LECTIO DIVINA

(Contemplative praying of the Scriptures)

BOTH the kataphatic and apophatic traditions are expressed in the writings of the sixth-century mystic (pseudo-) Dionysius the Aereopagite, who in turn drew upon the earlier writings of Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory of Nyssa. His very brief book, *The Mystical Theology*, has been of incalculable importance in both the Christian East and West.

HE who binds to himself a Joy

Doth the winged life destroy

But he who kisses the Joy as it flies

Lives in Eternity's sunrise

Eternity, William Blake,

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