



LIBERATING GOD: CLASSICAL THEISM AND POLITICAL SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT: Accounts of spirituality are incomplete unless they take into account what I term political spirituality, the working out of religiously motivated political commitment. Working within the Christian tradition, I examine the interaction between political spirituality and God-concepts. My argument is that apophatic classical theism is better suited to underwriting political spirituality than are more recent non-classical doctrines of God. I lay out critiques of classical theism on the part of recent theologians and argue that, far from these critiques being decisive, there are positive reasons to favour apophatic classical theism for political reasons. I conclude by examining how the apophatic classical theist can engage with Marx's critique of religion.

KEYWORDS: classical theism, apophaticism, political spirituality, doctrine of God, Marx

Introduction

In recent years there has been an entirely welcome move in analytic theology and philosophy of religion towards a focus on the spiritual life (Cottingham, 2014). It is, for many thinkers at least, no longer acceptable to ignore the fact that religion is concerned with human realities and sensibilities, with prayer and with moral striving, with growth in insight and with persons' comportments towards reality. Much though this humane turn represents progress in our disciplines, it runs the risk of being unbalanced, from both a biblical and a contemporary theological perspective, unless it begins to attend to the social and political components of the spiritual life.

All of us writing and thinking in the 21st century West are hamstrung in our conceptualisation of the spiritual life by dominant understandings of spirituality. For these, spirituality is something individual, discarnate, and divorced from worldly matters such as social justice or the exercise of political power. The archetype of someone living the spiritual life is, for this way of thinking, a man kneeling on his own,

praying inwardly and seeking union with God. It is not, of course, that such union is without spiritual or moral implications, but these are mediated through the effects on individual action of a transformation that is understood as fundamentally inner and private.

Against this conceptualisation of the spiritual life it should be insisted that this life is far from an “inner” or “private” matter. Members of religious traditions feed the hungry, engage in political campaigns and work for international development, all in the name of their tradition. Nor are these things regarded as adjuncts to the spiritual life, a worldly accompaniment to deeper and more important realities. They are part of the spiritual life, integral to it, and necessary to a balanced spirituality.

My purpose in this paper is to explore how what we might call political spirituality relates to God-concepts. Examining the claim that various mitigations of classical theism are best suited to underwriting this spirituality, I will argue instead that (what I term) apophatic classical theism does a better job at so underwriting political spirituality. I will conclude by showing that apophatic classical theism allows us an answer to Marx’s critique of belief in God, surely a virtue in the realm of political spirituality. Before all of this, it is necessary to explain what I understand by apophatic classical theism. I will work within the Christian tradition, in order to make the argument of this paper manageable, but many of the points made are much more widely applicable.

Apophatic Classical Theism

What I am calling apophatic classical theism is really just classical theism, the conception of God held by a panoply of historically significant thinkers, such as Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, paradigmatically for me, Aquinas. I am using the expression “apophatic classical theism” to emphasise a feature of the conception that is often underemphasised, both by classical theism’s opponents and, sometimes, by its advocates. Classical theism is to a large extent an exercise in negative theology; it is a conception of God according to which there are severe constraints on our capacity to hold a thick conception of God. In particular, there is an important sense in which we cannot say what God is (STh Ia, q3, pr.).

The classical theist’s starting point is creation. What we signify with the word “God” is the reason why there is something rather than nothing at all. And, however much we might want to go on to say that the divine reality transcends our thought and linguistic capabilities, the createdness of the universe provides a way-in to God-talk. As Augustine puts the point,

And what is He? I asked the earth; and it answered, ‘I am not He.’ And everything on earth made the same confession. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the creeping things that lived, and they replied, ‘We are not

your God. Seek higher than we.' I asked the breezy air; and the universal atmosphere with its inhabitants answered, 'I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: 'Neither,' they said, 'are we the God whom you seek.'

And I answered all these things which crowd about the door of my flesh, 'You have told me concerning my God that you are not He. Tell me something positive about Him!' And with a loud voice they exclaimed: 'He made us.' (Conf X: vi)

Because God is the creator there are ways of talking about God which cannot be truthful. In particular God cannot be a dependent being, in any way reliant on other entities for God's existence and nature, or else God would be one of the entities of whom the question "why does this exist rather than nothing?" could be asked, and a vicious explanatory regress would ensue. This is to say, as Edward Feser has noted, that "God's ultimacy has a regulative status in classical theism that it does not have in nonclassical forms of theism" (Feser, 2023, p. 10). From God's ultimacy follows, crucially for the apophatic classical theist, that God is simple: nothing which would involve there being composition in God may truthfully be predicated of God, or else that composition would itself stand in need of explanation (STh Ia, q3, a7, co.).

The entities we encounter as we make our way around the world are composite, and our language is fashioned for talking about such entities. Simplicity, then, delivers that God is very unlike those entities: indeed, that way of putting the matter is not entirely satisfactory, since it suggests that God exists on a scale of comparison with creaturely entities, albeit at the far end of the scale. On the contrary, the usual bases of comparison between creaturely entities are entirely absent in the case of God: God does not instantiate quantities, God has no properties distinct from Godself, and so on. We might very well use the language of God as wholly other, as long as it was not taken to imply that God is distant from creatures; God is intimately present to every creature as its creator, holding it in being for every moment of its existence. God is "more inward to me than my most inward part" writes Augustine (Conf III: vi).

Thus classical apophatic theism. One implication of the view, and one which will be of importance for what follows, is that the suggestion - pervasive in the analytic tradition and in certain strands of popular piety - that God is a person looks questionable. To see this note that as well as holding that God is not composite, the believer in divine ultimacy after the classical apophatic model is going to deny that God has emotions, and more generally that God responds to creatures (either would involve something being caused in God; but God is supposed to be explanatorily ultimate). God does not suffer alongside creatures as God. Nor does the simple God possess mental states distinct from Godself. Nor again does God, the creator of spacetime, exist in time or experience a succession of states (this would be incompatible with simplicity). God begins to seem very unlike a person, in the usual sense of that word at least; God lacks characteristic features of personhood. Theistic

personalists, adherents to a rival conception of God, reject classical apophatic theism on this basis, often claiming that the resulting picture is truer to both scripture and religious experience (Davies, 2020, p. 11).

We will examine in a moment the position that theistic personalism is more conducive to Christian political commitment than is apophatic classical theism. Before that something should be said about a feature of apophatic classical theism which will be of relevance for our discussion. Since God is supremely distinct from creatures and does not occupy any kind of shared logical space with them (McCabe, 2015, Ch. 5), God does not compete with creatures metaphysically. In particular, God's causing some effect is not incompatible with a creaturely cause bringing about that same effect. This non-competitiveness has been stressed in contemporary theology by Katherine Tanner (2004), amongst others. In a Thomistic register: God is the primary cause, creatures are secondary causes.

The Challenge to Classical Theism From Political Spirituality

Apophatic classical theism, as I have set it out, is subject to a number of attacks from within contemporary philosophical theology. It is sometimes claimed in particular that the denial of characteristically personal attributes to God – the capacity to suffer, to respond to creatures, and to change, for instance – leaves us with a picture of God that is neither faithful to scripture nor representative of an entity worthy of worship. Although I take this line of criticism to be mistaken, I will not engage with it directly here.¹ My interest is rather in a tendency to reject the classical picture within explicitly *political* theology. Theology done from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, so runs the claim, and which takes seriously the scriptural and experiential insight that God takes sides on behalf of the poor, must think of God in a way other than that proposed by the classical theist.

So, for example, writing from a feminist perspective Pamela Sue Anderson has this to say,

Why should the overall conception [of God] remain while endless debates centre on each of the divine attributes especially in relation to the ever-popular problem of evil? Feminist theologians, amongst others, have argued that it is far more constructive to try to alleviate

¹ On the question of fidelity to scripture, however, it ought to be insisted that the scriptures do not typically offer *any* explicit metaphysics of the divine. There are serious questions here about how theology engages with the scriptural text, an area in which analytic theology has lacked sophistication. Rather than mining the biblical books for proof texts, insensitive to genre and context, we need to take a less direct but more sustained route of theological reflection on central components of biblical pictures of God. Crucial to these, and of growing centrality in newer books of the Hebrew Bible, is that God is the *creator*: classical theism issues from reflection on this.

suffering than to justify the existence of evil *and* a good, all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal God. Why not consider beginning philosophy of religion with something different from the traditional conception, even different from variations on this basic conception of a divine being? (2002, p. 53)

Of course the apophatic classical theist will want to understand the traditional divine attributes in terms of negative theology: God cannot be limited in knowledge and power, cannot exist in time, and so on.² But one suspects Anderson, if she doesn't understand by this the 'traditional conception' will at least understand it as one of the "variations on this basic conception."

From within the tradition of feminist liberation theology, Mary Grey writes of that tradition,

The concept of a God who suffers with the pain of women and all broken people is much to the fore. 'God weeps with our pain', as the Chinese theologian Kwok Pui Lan wrote. (2007, p. 113)

Having approvingly cited Pascal on the distinction between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the God of the philosophers, Gustavo Gutiérrez goes on to write,

As a matter of fact, philosophy – or at least a certain type of philosophy – has a great trouble conceiving of the God of biblical revelation. To give an example: for thinking that is based on Aristotle, it is difficult to say that God is love. Within the categories of Greek thought, love is a *pathos*, a passion; it implies a need and therefore a dependence on something or someone. For this reason, love cannot be attributed to the perfect being. Now, all this is not simply a matter of conceptual stumbling blocks; at issue is the way in which human beings approach God. (1996, p. 61)

In particular, for Gutiérrez, what is at issue is the way in which the poor approach God in the midst of their poverty and their struggles and receive the love of God. The apophatic classical theist is likely to demur from the suggestion that her thinking is based on Aristotle (the philosophical roots of the position lie much more within neo-Platonism). However, there is a real challenge to her thinking here, since there being *pathos* in God runs contrary to her characteristic claims about divine aseity and divine impassibility. Unless she can offer an account whereby apophatic classical theism is

² Interestingly, there is a movement from within classical theism which denies that the problem of evil, mentioned here by Anderson, arises for it. See Davies (2006).

true, yet God can come alongside God's people in love and liberation, she stands subject to damaging critique.

Famously Jürgen Moltmann, an early pioneer of Western political theology, in his *The Crucified God* supported the suggestion that God suffers *qua* God. In order to shore up this suggestion, Moltmann takes subtle aim at the classical doctrine of divine immutability,

Nicaea rightly said against Arius: God is not changeable. But that statement is not absolute; it is only a simile. God is not changeable as creatures are changeable. However, the conclusion should not be drawn from this that God is unchangeable in every respect, for this negative definition merely says that God is under no constraint from that which is not of God. The negation of changelessness by which a general distinction is drawn between God and man must not lead to the conclusion that he is intrinsically unchangeable. If God is not passively changeable by other things like other creatures [sic], this does not mean he is not free to change himself, or even free to allow himself to be changed by others of his own free will. (2015, p. 237)

God allowing Godself to be changed by others is precisely what Moltmann thinks happens in the life of Christ, paradigmatically at the crucifixion, where God freely undergoes that particular form of change which is suffering. We might note in passing that if, as seems plausible, change is internally related to time, such that some entity can change only if that entity is situated within time, then any imputation of changeability to God, even of the apparently restricted sort we see in Moltmann will involve (if it is to be consistent with the metaphysics of time and change) a rejection of divine eternity. The doctrine of divine eternity, that God is not in time, is a centrepiece of apophatic classical theism: whatever God is, God cannot be situated within time, for God is the *creator* of time.

However, it is the classical doctrine of impassibility which is most obviously the target of the authors we have surveyed. For apophatic classical theism God cannot be moved, or affected, by any creature (nor, *contra* Moltmann, can God *choose* to be so affected). One way of looking at this denial is through the lens of ultimacy: if God is, in some sense, the ultimate or foundational reality then God enjoys aseity, and is not susceptible to being moved by other realities. Another is through the lens of divine simplicity: if we must deny that God's being involves any form of composition, then in particular we must deny that God's being contains any composition of possibility and actuality, yet being moved by a creature would involve precisely the actualisation of a possibility (the possibility of being moved).

The reason that our authors, and many others, target impassibility is that they want to be able to affirm that God suffers alongside God's creatures. It must be frankly admitted by any adherent of the classical doctrine of God who wishes to be sensitive

to human suffering, that there is a powerful *prima facie* case for jettisoning that doctrine in the light of the belief that God liberates. For, so the liberation theologians tell us, on the basis of their reading of scripture, God stands alongside God's suffering people, in solidarity with them, fighting with them against the oppression they suffer. Yet, the argument goes, it would be a cold solidarity in which the one expressing that solidarity was unmoved by the suffering of victims of oppression, in which they did not empathise, suffer alongside, those victims. In particular, it might seem doubtful that this kind of solidarity can truthfully be described as the outworking of *love*.

We should observe that the non-classical God of many political theologians looks far more like a person than does God as classically conceived. A being who can change, can stand in affective states, and can be moved seems relevantly similar enough to ourselves to merit the description "person." However different in many respects the conception of God in question makes God from ourselves (and adherents of this conception might follow theistic personalist Richard Swinburne in ascribing to God the omni-properties, for instance in his 2016) God is, on this conception, fundamentally the same kind of thing as us, namely a person. We have, then, a version of theistic personalism. And it ought to be apparent why this is a desirable result for many practitioners of political spirituality. It is, in our experience, persons who liberate, persons who empathise, and persons who stand in solidarity.

In the next two sections I am going to argue that, contrary to these appearances, apophatic classical theism is better equipped than non-classical variants of theism to underwrite political spirituality. Because, from a Christian perspective, God is revealed as liberator, the ability of apophatic classical theism to elegantly map out a theology of divine liberation provides reason to hold that apophatic classical theism is *true*.

Apophatic Classical Theism: The God Who Liberates

If we read the Hebrew Bible we get a sense that Moses liberates the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.³ And indeed, at the burning bush, Moses is told "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."⁴ Yet later in the same chapter we are confronted with God saying "I will bring [the people of Israel] out of the misery of Egypt."⁵ Confronting this text with an eye to the doctrine of God⁶ a natural response is to suggest that, far from requiring anything of that area of doctrine,

³ Nothing here turns on the *historicity* of the Exodus narrative or of other texts treating of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

⁴ Exodus 3:10 NRSV.

⁵ Exodus 3:16.

⁶ That is, in particular, not claiming that there is a doctrine of God contained in the literal sense of the text, but rather asking of the text what kind of doctrine of God and divine action can be deployed to make sense of the kind of divine and human action described in the text.

this text is compatible with wide range of doctrines of God: all that is needed is to be able to affirm that God *makes use of* Moses. God is, on this view, the liberator by virtue of causing Moses to liberate.

A problem with this view is that it understands God's liberative activity as being at one remove from the reality of liberation. God is only in a certain sense the liberator at all. Whilst we say, and know what we mean in saying that, "Marks and Spencer baked those donuts," we do not literally mean that the board of directors, or whoever we wish to identify with the company Marks and Spencer, baked the doughnuts. In fact, we can be more careful with our language, stating that an employee in the bakery department baked the donuts. Yet there is a clear sense in which the company, through employing the baker and instructing her to bake the doughnuts, caused the doughnuts to be baked. Now, on the view that God liberates by causing others to liberate, God stands in the relationship of human liberation that the board of directors stand to the baking of the donut. It is an indirect, mediated relationship. Yet scripture reports the song "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."⁷ It does not sound as though causal distance is being suggested here between God and the act of throwing horse and riders into the sea. Yet on the other hand, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the oppressors of Israel were drowned.

God liberates and human beings liberate. The details or historicity of the exodus narrative do not matter to making this point, although the text serves as an example of how those in the past have thought about divine and human action in liberation. God liberates and we liberate, and both are true at the same time. It makes perfect sense to attribute, say, the granting of civil rights in the United States to the liberating action of God - one can imagine the Magnificat being prayed in response to this, "[he] has lifted up the lowly" - but it makes equal sense to attribute the same political victory to Martin Luther King Jr. and others.

One problem here is that if we are not to attribute causal distance to God with respect to the act of liberation, and we have seen that there is reason not to do that, then we might seem to be attributing liberating action to competing agents in a manner that is metaphysically intolerable. You and I compete for *metaphysical space*. By this I mean that to the extent that I ϕ then you do not ϕ . One and the same act of ϕ -ing cannot be completely mine and also completely yours. If I completely ϕ at a given time and place then you do not ϕ . But doesn't the same consideration now apply to God and human beings? Surely it cannot be the case that one and the same act of liberation is completely the work of God and completely the work of human beings, contradicting what many Christians seem to have wanted to say about liberation.

This conclusion only follows if God and God's creatures compete for metaphysical space. And at this point, apophatic classical theism can safeguard the instinctive language of many practitioners of political spirituality. For remember, on the

⁷ Exodus 15:1.

apophatic classical view God does not occupy a shared logical space with God's creatures. In particular, God and creatures do not operate on the same causal level. If I am entirely responsible for some act of liberation, then you cannot be responsible for that very same act (in a proximate fashion, at least, remember the Marks and Spencer case). Things are not so with God and human beings: I can be entirely responsible for some act of liberation with God also being entirely responsible for it, at a different level of causation, operating through and in my free action, as primary cause, rather than competing with them.

So claims the apophatic classical theist. And that she has such a position available to her counts in favour of the truth of her position from the perspective of those who think it is *true* that God and human beings entirely liberate in some cases. Another argument in favour of apophatic classical theism from a liberative perspective is less direct. It turns on the fact that in order to change the world, we need to *understand* the world.⁸

Within Christian theology it has been claimed, notably by the *Radical Orthodoxy* school, that we cannot understand human societies adequately without doing so through a theological lens (Milbank, 2006). This has obvious and detrimental implications for the potential for solidarity between Christian and non-Christian activists. On the other hand we have popular approaches in religion and spirituality which express credence in, what McCabe terms, a god or the gods. These anthropomorphic entities assert immanent control over areas or aspects of the world, and as such close of the path to an autonomous secular understanding of those areas or aspects. By contrast, says McCabe, himself an apophatic classical theist,

[...] it is the God of the Hebrews (who in the Jewish interpretation comes to be seen as creator) who is hailed in the decalogue as liberator; it is the gods (parts of history) and the whole religion of the gods that is seen to stand for alienation and dependency. 'I am [the Lord] your God who brought you out of slavery; you shall have no gods.'

God the creator, who is not one of the participants in history but the mover of Cyrus and of all history, is the liberator fundamentally because he is not a god, because there are no gods, or at least no gods to be worshiped. This leaves history in human hands under the judgement of God. Human misery can no longer be attributed to the gods and accepted with resignation or evaded with sacrifices. The long slow process can begin of identifying the human roots of oppression and exploitation, just as the way now lies open for the scientific understanding and control of the forces of nature. (2015, p. 43)

⁸ There is a lazy anti-theoretical way of quoting Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it." Of course, as Marx would have agreed, interpreting the world is often a precondition for changing it.

The point here is that because God's agency does not compete with ours we can seek to understand the social world using our own methods – feminist theory, for example, or economic analysis – without fear that in so doing we are ignoring God. God is not a thing in the world to be taken into account by social scientific investigation. God utterly transcends the world, whilst being immanently present to it as creator and liberator. What God is not, however, is an inhabitant of the world.

Precisely because God is not an inhabitant of the world, then, we are set free to understand the world in particular kinds of way. And this matters because, contrary to a certain kind of reading of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach,⁹ we need to understand the world in order to change it. Apophatic classical theism creates space for an activity, learning about social reality, which is partly constitutive of human liberation. Therefore we have another reason for those who hold that God liberates to accept classical theism.

Answering the Non-Classicalist

It will be claimed by non-classical theists committed to a theologically motivated praxis of liberation that, the foregoing notwithstanding, apophatic classical theism is not able to underwrite liberative action. First and foremost, surveying amongst other writings those quoted above, the reason for this is that, according to apophatic classical theism, God does not *suffer*, and in particular does not suffer alongside the exploited and oppressed. This, it is argued, places severe constraints on the extent to which God can be a co-liberator with human beings from their own exploitation and oppression. After all, someone who liberates alongside others stands in *solidarity* with them. Yet, solidarity involves empathy with the person who is the object of solidarity, and empathy in turn involves a preparedness to suffer alongside that person. And this is precisely what the classical God cannot do, suffer alongside God's creatures. Therefore God cannot stand in solidarity with creatures. But, as we have already had cause to note, it is part and parcel of biblical faith that God does stand in solidarity with the oppressed. It follows that apophatic classical theism is false, and that the theist ought to embrace some form of classical theism.

This is a serious objection to the position developed up until this point in this paper. Our argument has been that apophatic classical theism sits well with God being active in, and in solidarity with, human liberation, and that therefore there is reason to believe that apophatic classical theism is true. The argument now on the table proceeds in the opposite direction: the apophatic classical theist is unable to account for divine-human solidarity, and therefore she ought to abandon her theology in favour of non-

⁹ Not, I think, Marx's intended reading. Marx himself, after all, put plenty of work into understanding the world in order to change it.

classical theism (unless, of course, the position she is now in causes her to abandon theism altogether).¹⁰

The apophatic classical theist can, however, respond to this objection. Solidarity, she can admit, does indeed, *in the human case*, involve a preparedness to suffer alongside the one with whom one is in solidarity. However, we are not dealing with the human case. We are dealing with divine-human solidarity; and there are good reasons to think that God can stand alongside human beings in solidarity without possibly suffering alongside them. This is related to it being the case that God not being in a position to suffer alongside creatures is not a lack in God, but rather that creatures need to, at least potentially, suffer in order to be solidaristic is a lack in creatures. There is no lack in God in this respect because God's impassibility does not make God remote from creatures. Rather, the God who is both transcendent and immanent is intimately present to God's creatures. God does not have to enter into God's creatures' sufferings from the outside, as McCabe puts it (2015, pp. 39–53); rather there is no gap between God and his creatures, and it is from this position of immediate presence that God loves, and stands in solidarity with, suffering humanity.

Replying in this way, the apophatic classical theist can answer her nonclassical opponent. At the root of the reply are two thoughts. First, God does not compete with creatures for "metaphysical space," so that God can be immediately and intimately present to a creature without thereby displacing the creature's own integrity. Second, God is fundamentally different from creatures (to the extent that, perhaps we ought to be wary even of talking of difference, which seems to suggest some shared scale of comparison) – we cannot simply assume that what obtains in a creaturely case, that solidarity involves preparedness to suffer, carries over to the case of the divine Creator.

Revisiting Marx

Finally, another consideration in favour of apophatic classical theism sitting well with political spirituality is that it is in a good position to engage in dialogue with the foremost critic of religion from a political position, Karl Marx. Something like a Marxian critique of religion remains common, and if that critique is successful it counts against any form of politically-inflected theism.

Marx, following Feuerbach, holds that religion involves projection. We project aspects of ourselves, our aspirations, hopes, and fears onto God, heaven, and so on. Going beyond Feuerbach, Marx locates the cause of this projection in socially situated human alienation:

Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself

¹⁰ She might do this if she holds that apophatic classical theism is the only tenable form of theism.

again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man* – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality. (1844)

Now this projection is *prima facie* disempowering, since to the extent that people invest God with their own agency, they themselves lack an understanding of themselves as agents. If I project my own ability to liberate myself onto God then I will lack any sense that I can liberate myself. Instead God is the one who liberates me, and is to be invoked to come to my aid whilst I remain politically passive to the extent that I hold that God is my liberator. The way out of this dilemma is for me to abandon, or to be brought by socio-political circumstances to abandon, the religious beliefs that diminish my felt agency. So, Marx writes,

The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. It is, therefore, the *task of history*, once the *other-world of truth* has vanished, to establish the *truth of this world*. It is the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms* once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*. (1844)

If Marx is right then his criticism has a particular bite against politically engaged theism, in general, and politically engaged Christianity, in particular. For if we want to claim that God liberates us, but our idea of God is of an entity that displaces our agency, then our claim about divine liberation is in tension with the view that we liberate ourselves. But self-liberation is surely essential to human emancipation, so we should, along with Marx, reject this view of God, recognising it as a projection from our own situation.

The natural Marxist path to take on the basis of these considerations is the one to atheism. However, the apophatic classical theist has another option available. She can agree with Marx at least to the extent of holding that we frequently do project what is

unfulfilled in ourselves onto the divine. In scriptural terms, we make of God an *idol*. She can also agree that this projection has social causes. However, rather than counting against the possibility of an authentic political spirituality, this recognition of idolatry provides underwriting for it. Recognising inadequate conceptions of God as the result of projection, and acknowledging that they suggest metaphysical competition between God and creatures, she can assert her own conception of God. This conception avoids the suggestion of competition, as we have seen, and is fully compatible with the use of a Marxian critique to strip away inadequate conceptions of God. With those conceptions stripped away, we are left with the God of apophatic classical theism, who – not least because we cannot know the nature of that God – cannot be merely the postulated correlate of our own projection.

That God, the God of apophatic classical theism, is not only not subject to the same kind of politically motivated critique which attaches itself to deity under other conceptions. That God is also, as we have seen, appropriately recognised as the God who liberates God's creatures from exploitation and oppression. And that, on the scriptural hypothesis that God does indeed liberate, is reason for Christians to believe in the God of apophatic classical theism.

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