
The Divine Infinity & Incomprehensibility

God's nature is incomprehensible. Our various concepts, terms and names for Him are like trying to define the essence of perfume from the smell

“Your name is ointment poured forth” [Song of Songs 1:3]. To me something like the following is signified through this verse: the unlimited [divine] nature cannot be accurately contained by a name; rather, every capacity for concepts and every form of words and names, even if they seem to contain something great and befitting God's glory, are unable to grasp his reality. But starting from certain traces and sparks, as it were, our words aim at the unknown, and from what we can grasp we make conjectures by a kind of analogy about the ungraspable.

Whatever name we may adopt to signify the perfume of divinity, it is not the perfume itself which we signify by our expressions; rather, we reveal just the slightest trace of the divine odour by means of our theological terms. As in the case of jars from which perfume has been poured out, the perfume's own nature is not known. But from the slight traces left from the vapours in the jar we get some idea about the perfume that has been emptied out.

Hence we learn that the perfume of divinity, whatever it is in its essence, transcends every name and thought. However, the wonders visible in the universe give material for the theological terms by which we call God wise, powerful, good, holy, blessed, eternal, judge, saviour, and so forth. All these give some small indication of the divine perfume's quality. Creation retains the traces of this divine perfume through its visible wonders as in the example of a perfume jar.¹

The bubbling spring – a metaphor for the infinity of God

It is just as if you could see that spring which Scripture tells us rose from the earth at the beginning in such quantities that it watered the entire face of the earth (Gen. 2:10 ff.). As you came near the spring you would marvel, seeing that the water was endless, as it constantly gushed up and poured forth. Yet you could never say that you had seen all the water. How could you see what was still hidden in the bosom of the earth? Hence no matter how long you might stay at the spring, you would always be beginning to see the water. For the water never stops flowing, and it is always beginning to bubble up again.

It is the same with one who fixes his gaze on the infinite beauty of God. It is constantly being discovered anew, and it is always seen as something new and strange in comparison with what the mind has already understood. And as God continues to reveal Himself, man continues to wonder; and he never exhausts his desire to see more, since what he is waiting for is always more magnificent, more divine, than all that he has already seen.²

¹ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 1* (McCambley, p.53)

² *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 11 (From Glory to Glory, p.246)*

“Seeing” God in the darkness

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it [Exodus 20:21]? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany [the burning bush], for then the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness ... Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated.

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*,³ thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature...

... The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.⁴

³ John 1:18

⁴ *Life of Moses* 2.162-5 (pp.94-6)