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AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY

The Apophatic Christ:

Bearing the Suffering Divinity of the World

By Beverly Lanzetta

THE UNIVERSAL CHRIST is not a topic about which I normally write and, when I do, my first thoughts turn to planetary suffering, the unity of all beings, the generosity of love, the beauty of creation, and—then—I often want to expand it further, beyond every name, to the apophatic, cosmic Presence. My reason for this is that the center of reality, which Christians call Jesus Christ, relinquishes every privilege or claim. This Apophatic Christ, who continually shares the self-emptying of divinity and embodies the suffering of the meek, who upholds unto death the exaltation of love, and who offers God-self as a host for the excluded outcast, draws me to silence.

What do I mean by the Apophatic Christ? I can best answer this question by reference to the thought of Raimundo Panikkar (1918–2010): “[T]he christic principle is neither a particular event nor a universal religion. What is it then? It is the center of reality as seen by the Christian tradition. But this vision is only the Christian vision, not an absolutely universal one. It is the *christic* universal vision.”¹ Panikkar’s perspective reminds us to keep open our faith claims, to welcome others into the circle of universal wisdom, and to discover new and deeper dimensions of our shared religious heritage.

Further, the Apophatic Christ is an encounter with the intense presence of divine intimacy that pierces our depth with the world’s suffering and the limitless love of the divine. Such moments of transcendence are not a source of absolutizing truth, but the radical reversal of self-interest and entrance into the mystery that defies naming: sacrifice and adoration, death and rebirth, humility and gratitude. It is universal because it is present in every religious story and permeates all beings and spheres of reality.

When I contemplate the sacrifice felt in the collective body—children torn from parents at our southern border, genocide in Darfur, women and girls kidnapped by ISIS, the homeless on our streets, famine in Yemen—I know in that deep, unnamed spark in our souls, a mystical place that pulses with *mercy within mercy*, that every travesty is my own. Now, more than ever, I search for meaning. I seek the indelibility of the human spirit, how the divine bears with us and in us the trials and tragedies of existence, how we are continually called to a more profound understanding of love and compassion, mercy and forgiveness in the throes of everything that subverts or tries to destroy.

In the Christian story, the death of Jesus on the cross draws us into the mystery of sacrifice, the profundity of matter, and the immanence hidden in transcendence. The cross collapses the ontological distance of the transcendent God and refocuses our vision on the immediacy of the divine person. Jesus bears in the body the radical self-emptying of divinity—he offers himself for the sake of the world. This self-offering that was “in the beginning” was “made flesh” (John 1:1–14).

The cross reveals an apophatic christology in which Jesus relinquishes all claim. There is nothing in the final moment that he can hold onto. He is torn from everything: name, honor, dignity, truth, security, the Father, life. There is no thought form that can make sense

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of the event. It is *unthinkable*. It is unthinkable for two reasons: (1) the significance of an event that defies all reason and overshadows every attempt to speak, and (2) the immense suffering, which is inflicted on *every level*, renders mute any possibility of justification.

Here, we are confronted with the tenderness of the self-emptying God who, in utter vulnerability, lays God-self at the feet of this world. God dies *for us, in us, with us, and through us*. The passion of fully giving shatters every construct, even that which names divinity. God dies not only for the sake of the world; God dies to God. Ethics, morals, and justice are incommensurate with the pain that is inflicted and the suffering that is endured. No theory, metaphysics, or karmic explanation can defend the radical suffering.

There is the crucifixion itself. The fact that humans are capable of legitimizing, and then inflicting, cruel and tortuous punishment is utter madness. The early Christian theologians who fought so vigorously and adamantly for the fully human-fully divine Christ must have glimpsed its mystical significance. The Nicaean and Chalcedon struggles concerning Jesus' divinity and humanity bring into Western consciousness a seminal concept of the divinity of the flesh. Yet, having confronted such rare wisdom, humans continue to pillage the majesty of bodies and the universe of cells.

But the crucifixion calls to our conscience again, because it is not just the "mere flesh," the supposedly inferior and illusory matter of this world, *that* which will be left behind by the immortality of the soul, that is violated. No, the Christian story forces us to confront

anew the denial of an integrated holiness: *The body of God* was crucified. Here, the seriousness of the holiness of the world, in both matter and aesthetic form, is presented. The scandal of the cross is the willful infliction of suffering. We are always in danger of trying to kill God in us, in the world, and in each other. We shun our own divinity. The universe bears this travesty without word, because no word will do.

In the agony of Golgotha, when all systems of thought crumble, when every justification is let go, every metaphysical speculation dies, and the imagination withers away, God is left in openness. There is nothing to be said. Furthermore, in that moment, we are shown, in the silence, in the absence of conjectures, the peace that wrenches the hearts of stone—those hearts capable of inflicting wounds: No matter what, stay open and do not pass on the pain. Our lives depend on it.

We are reminded: The fullness of God in us is rejected as too radical, too aware, too merciful to bear. Why do we do it? There is no answer and, since no answer will ever do, the wounds objectified on the body of Jesus Christ (and on the bodies of all those who have suffered throughout history, and who continue to suffer today) stain like indelible ink the pure ground of the soul. The wounds continue to remind us that there is something more we can give, that dispassionate awareness is not enough.

It is here that language is in danger of betraying the very heart of the matter, of serving as a traitor to the holy, and of violating the radical love that compels life into existence. At this juncture, a language

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that refuses to pass from abstraction to the embodied experience of daily crucifixions operates primarily as a balm to stave off the forever-unthinkable. From this perspective, Christian theology, even its negative theology, is not radical enough. It does not go to the cross with Jesus, but stands apart, an observer of his plight.

Yet, we do not have to physically suffer to mystically participate in the world's suffering. We do not have to experience cruelty to mystically empathize with victims and survivors. Our hearts and minds and souls are conceived in and part of the wellspring of divine compassion. Even when we are not aware, when we have no apparent consciousness of this fact, we are participating, we are empathizing, we are one. It is this acceptance of our inherent *oneness* with all beings, and with the cosmic, universal force of love that guides us into the mystery of *our* incarnation, *our* union of divinity and humanity, and *our* capacity to forgive and heal.

I HAVE FOUND MYSELF speechless many times—on Good Friday, standing in the back of Immaculate Conception Church, as priests and altar boys processed the crucifix down the aisle, stopping to allow worshippers to venerate the cross. I was torn by the immense gift and responsibility placed upon us and also pained by the exclusive ownership of the name—Jesus Christ—as if any temporal authority could lay claim to power or privilege. It did not matter whether I was in a synagogue, ashram, cathedral, or kiva. I honored the ones who bore humanity's sins.

Another time, with the Penitente Brotherhood in Abiquiu, New Mexico, walking on my knees over dirt and gravel, to kiss the feet of an immense wooden crucifix, I was overcome with the closeness of God. All of us knew what this devotion meant—we took the anguish into our hearts, repenting for our own and humanity's collective neglect of the pain we inflict, expanding our souls to become compassionate ones, like the figure, nailed to a cross, that forgives and heals.

I found it when sharing a meal during summer solstice at Santa Clara Pueblo; with Hindu mystics steeped in the sacred Upanishads; and in the solemn High Holy Days, atoning with Jewish friends: the unimaginable intimacy of presence, the profound closeness of the cosmic breath of life from within every cell, every breath.

Perhaps most telling is that I feel and experience the Universal Christ in the unknown and unseen divine presence of Sophia, Holy

Wisdom. She is the union of intimacy and transcendence, and the essence of personal transformation and the awakening of the true self. She is a return to origins, and our own deepest identity. Breaking into history, Sophia is guiding us to a new expression of human fullness in the divine life.

Her wisdom leads to embodied contemplation and to a spirituality of compassion, which focuses on love of creation and the flourishing of life. It is her merciful, benevolent attitude that gives us the courage to break through destructive elements within religious consciousness and, uncovering an original or primary vantage point, to cocreate new wisdom traditions for our time. In this reimagining, we leave behind stories of sin and vengeance, a punitive and harsh God, or a spirituality of fallenness.

The unwavering constancy of Divine Sophia is ever-present, neither judging, rejecting, arbitrary, violent, capricious, indifferent, nor unforgiving. We are made and composed of Divine Love; we know a loving God who does not withdraw. We know a suffering God who bears the arrogance and deafness of our small selves, and of our closed hearts and minds. If we let go of the survival strategies and damaged beliefs that conscript us into being less than we are, transformation is possible; harmony and wisdom are possible. Healing of soul wounds and of societal repression can begin to transform reality.

We are tasked with making deification—the capacity of each person to achieve holiness—real; that is, living in such a way that the integration and embodiment of the divine-human, especially the relationship of the physical and spiritual, is woven into the fabric of daily life. It means redefining personhood, not as fallen or wandering, but as the self who carries the seeds of transformation and future renewal. It is to change the focus of humanity's progression in history from deficit to surplus, from deficiency to strength. This is the vital shift in consciousness needed to embrace the blessedness of creation and to assist in the building of a more holy and peaceful Earth community.

THE APOPHATIC CHRIST assumes no ground upon which to proclaim; his proclamation is without ground. It is, in fact, the disruption of every theological ground. It is a theology that calls each to *kenosis*, to the brink of ontological unsaying, and to the end of proclamation and decree. The charity of self-erasure makes

possible dialogue, transformation, and, most important, the ability to love and be merciful.

Through the marks on the page, the form of the sound, and the gesture of the face, divine intimacy is spread. Silence speaks most eloquently when the self has been opened by compassion and made empty.

Word, tradition, and revelation are originally kenotic. What is unthinkable is a totally realized God.

Several paragraphs in this essay have been adapted and reprinted from Beverly J Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 84–87, with permission of State University of New York Press.

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NOTES

- 1 Raimundo Panikkar, “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness,” *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John H. Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 92.