

Article

The Rhythms of the Via Negativa

Jeffery Jonathan Joshua (יֵשׁוּעַ) Davis^{*1} & Grant Gillett²

¹The Embassy of Peace, Whitianga, New Zealand

²Bioethics Centre, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Abstract

The *via negativa* is an old-medieval understanding of our knowledge of God. It expresses humility as human cognition attempts to formulate definitive doctrines about God. As such, it moves us to seek spiritual insights and ‘habits of the heart’ which embody true faith and holiness. These revolve around and realise love for all created life, especially but not exclusively human life. The life of Jesus and his transcendence of the sometimes bitter divide between Christians and Jews embodies and sets about for our thinking this recognition and surpassing of difference illustrated in some of our best loved New Testament stories which, if interpreted without love, would mislead us and blind us to many of the sources of human failures and suffering. This paper aims to sketch the basis for a return to that inclusive loving stance.

Keywords: *Via negativa*, the vibe of the thing, cultural niche, truth, kindness, God.

Introduction

The complexities of human consciousness and the human mind have produced neuro-philosophical concepts which could either be mined to yield a form of scepticism (as is the tendency of philosophers inclined to a scientific version of truth) or instead taken to renew interest in the *via negativa* as an admission of the limitations of the human neurocognitive system in dealing with that to which we ought most to attend in trying to cognise the basis of religious belief or practice and, thereby, of human spirituality.

Despite the human mind producing many apparently opposite conceptions of reality, there still remains an unknown when we come to value, and that which art or culture attempts to conceptualise: “Believing means submitting to an authority. Having once submitted, you can’t then without rebelling against it, first call it in question and then once again find it acceptable.” [1] Here we are interested in exploring the dynamism of the human brain and the part it plays in living spiritual (rather than just cognitive) experience. We could start by acknowledging that theology is a field of inquiry and knowledge produced by the human mind and that, as many other fields, theology has also produced many thoughts, like the *via negativa* (*apophatic* way) and the *via positiva* (*cataphatic* way) when it comes to the knowledge and exploration of the nature of what humankind have called ‘God’.

*Correspondence: c/o Sarah Frew, The Embassy of Peace, Whitianga, New Zealand. E-mail: science@theembassyofpeace.com

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Is it true that the only things we can say about God are the things that God is not? Or could it be that, let us say, since we are taught that we are made in the image of God, we can get to know fundamental truths about human life, even with our limitations of language, concerning the good, as Aquinas and others have pointed out when referring to these two contrasting views, or as the pair: *via positiva* ^ *via negativa* = Knowledge of God (where one is cognitive and the other of the spirit).

Here we will focus on the *via negativa* in order to explore the rhythms of the brain in relation to these two apparently opposite (yet complementary) theological views; a triadic version of complementarity is, to follow the idea of neural incarnation: *via positiva* ^ *via negativa* = *rhythms of life*. These rhythms, embedded in human nature and language, allow us to engage successfully in our ecological niche or life world. Thus, spirituality and creativity may be intrinsic to the roots of our neurocognitive being.

I. Dynamic Neurophilosophy: the Rhythms of Life

Sadhu Sundar Singh [2], the Indian holy man of Sikh background who converted to Christianity said:

Should I worship Him from fear of hell, may I be cast into it. Should I worship Him from a desire of going to heaven, He will keep me from it. But should I worship Him from love alone, He reveals Himself to me that my whole heart might be filled with His love and presence.¹

This is not an academic statement, nor is it defined in terms of a creed or clearly stated cognitive content to which we are committed. This affirmation is consistent with the fact that we are born not made, so that industrial and other explicit and post-industrial models based in human function and modernist thinking form a metaphoric distortion of our being. We are dynamic and living, not designed for an external set of purposes and specifications, but rather exploring and expanding our own rhythms of life as a successful species in a given ecological niche. To this end we alternate between being open to the rhythms of life in the niche we inhabit and developing rhythms, which become our ways of life in spirit and imagination. These rhythms are holistic, being culturally influenced and ecologically attuned so that they are the preferred way in which the brain configures itself to maximise its life opportunities and fitness for success. As an example of these living dynamics, we find certain words resonate for us with a ring of truth beyond the scientific or cognitive aspect of our being.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. [3]

Human language in such a pronunciation rings true with our shared being in the world as a species that uses mutual strength to survive with stories that often pose puzzles for human creeds even as they express something profound for human beings. For instance, in the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:29-39). Jephthah was trapped by an offering or sacrifice mentality

¹ See **High Places Prayer**: <https://www.highplacesprayer.com/sadhu-sundar-singh/>

as interpreted by human culture at that point in history. [4] In the New Testament we see a new spiritual message about that cruel human practice evident in some form or other in many cultures.

The underlying cultural myth and its inhumanity is exposed by the crucifixion; that sacrifice speaks to a sense of something profound and engaging: the deep-felt loss of a father and mother for their son, with God himself cast as father. The story therefore resonates with all humankind. In the story of Jephthah, the sacrifice is a tragic result of human artifice incompatible with humanity, love, kindness and peace as spoken of by prophets (Ezekiel 18:21-23, Micah 6-8, Isaiah 55:6-9, Hosea 6:6 and Jeremiah 7:21-23). Human sacrifices are cast as distorting a deep truth about the sins of all. Acts of love can preserve well-being but not human sacrifice. The profundity of the Christian faith, in all its forms and in many places, is symbolised in the Eucharist: the ‘blood of the only son given for all’.

The mystery surrounding human life and death, understood incompletely in human codes of belief, resonates with the story of the child Jesus in the temple astounding the learned with the depth and profundity of the thoughts awakened; just so we grow from a dependent beginning in infancy to an increasingly competent and cognitively sophisticated adulthood in a setting, which helps form the person we are becoming. The ‘self’ neurocognitively ‘born’ (not made) in this way, can be inhabited and embodied, flourishing and not just functional. This distinctive way of being is not merely cognitive, but also affective, inchoate and mystical, catching on to neurocognitive rhythms responsive to place in time and history, within culture and beyond. This is the central point addressed in ‘The Brain of Melchizedek: A Cognitive Neuroscience Approach to Spirituality’. [5] Such spiritual values dynamically modify a neurocognitive map of the inhabited ecosphere adding a new comprehensive context, where transformative spiritual values [6] are part of our being, embodied at will and manifest in action complete with values and interpersonal relationship styles.

Such a philosophy of life (based on profound meanings and values like love), allows the individual to address the needs of the larger family even at personal costs. The dynamic brain is able to integrate this human subjective experience and produce intentional action. [7] The action is then grounded on the harmonisation of rhythms and life cycles, where the end result is that each person integrates the psyche, ideally minimising pain, stress and disease for future generations, while maximising general well-being embedded in the greater rhythms of life combining perception and action cycles in a holistic sensorimotor adaptation.

According to Aristotle, perception is active. There are no ideal forms in the mind. The actions of the intellect are to define and seek objects with its sensorimotor power and with its cognitive power to construct forms of them by abstraction from the examples presented to the senses. The forms of mental contents from stimuli are inscribed by the intellect with its mnemonic power onto an initially blank slate, the *tabula rasa*. [8]

Aquinas adds to this picture the idea of God, the Creator of all natural things. But human ideas of God are limited as many faiths acknowledge; ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’, for instance, is a medieval text which enjoins us to be humble about our cognitive abstractions and rather recommends that spiritual wisdom recognises that the rhythms are governed by love and humility rather than human cognitive commitments: “We must therefore pray in the height,

depth, length, and breadth of our spirits. Not in many words but in a little word of one syllable ... God.” [9]

II. Sensorimotor Patterning and Our ‘Ways of Going on’

Sensorimotor patterning is the foundation of well-being in any given ecological niche; any well adapted creature develops dietary habits and a range of potentially modifiable and dynamic ways of perceiving and behaving that are associatively connected so as to exploit the conditions that sustain its life and health.

The individual’s distinctive way of nourishing itself, perceiving things, and responding has species-typical features but also develops characteristics of its own. These ethological techniques, weaving together ways of seeing and ways of being and doing, characterise organisms of a range of types related by a number of features. In the human case, family tendencies and relationships, ethnic, and cultural types characteristic to a setting, language based, and spiritual connections all combine to form our neurocognitive rhythms. These varying ways of being are dynamic, changing and interactive - exploiting both internal (within the system itself) and external (reactive to the world and created or natural interconnected structures of dynamic forces in complex entwined relations). Thus, for instance, there is a Maori or an indigenous North American way of construing the world and one’s relation to it, just as there is a Northern European way. [10] Each mythology reflects human ways of being; family, connectedness and bonds of love and attachment such that we care for each other, are part of healthy human adaptation and are seen as internal to the source of our encultured being.

A truly scientific study of nature and human beings will put this dynamic into the key position it ought to hold and not make the mistake of shaping our view of nature upon very late features of human development, such as the industrial model, which applies to our own creations.

Where and when human beings live without such dynamic and spiritual connectedness, we become unhealthy in some way or another, and such disorders often exaggerate or distort some aspect of the human way of being, so that it no longer becomes a route to contentment and health but a discontent, thus tearing us apart and separating us from one another. [11] Perhaps the most important questions to investigate at this time in human history are: (1) How is it that the minds and brains of individuals share meanings in a way that keep them being together in the world with a form of collective mind or unconscious [12] or the noosphere [13], and (2) Is it possible that the noosphere is organised, as is everything else, interactively as morphic fields [14] that prescribe individual and collective behaviour embedded in complex inseparable feedback loops. This resonates with brain dynamics describing ‘How brains make up their minds’ [15] when embedded in ‘Societies of Brains’. [16] In reality we are embedded in societies of living breathing and interacting human beings with all their incarnate presence and eternal contemplations.

Based on our current developments of systems theory and cognitive neuroscience we intuit that some of the neural underpinnings of spiritual life ought to be found in the Rhythms of the Brain. [17-21]

What seems clear is that the neuron model, construed post-industrially without incorporating the oscillatory patterns of the brain dynamics, cannot explain how the brain participates in the

creation of knowledge and meaning for humans. The path of spirituality involves integration and shared meanings with others rooted in our thought and speech. Ancient spiritual values attune individuals inter-subjectively, sharing values that tend toward integration and seem to allow human beings to undergo a transformation (or transformations).

III. Thought & Speech

Thought is experiential, evocative, and to some degree idiosyncratic, showing inflections within systems of meaning introduced by 'our ways of going on' [22] and the terms we use to express ourselves. These ways of conversing, and the abstractions they embed, carry a wealth of information, some of which is explicit and codified but some implicit, and others dynamic and for that reason, less codifiable. By these two intertwined and mutually influencing routes, speech and cognition - or thought - allow flexibility, and what an engineering caste of mind might call 'imprecision' in our ways of thinking explicitly about things. This liminal freedom or openness could more charitably be referred to as style or art or 'the vibe of the thing'. As symbolism, art and spirituality are searching for that which we do not fully understand, the interplay gives rise to religions, ways of codifying (to the extent that is possible) our spiritual being and the knowledge it embeds. [23] Growing organically and within the way of going on that we inhabit, spirituality extends that holistic attunement beyond functionality, so that we delight in what we have made and are inspired by it.

This is the elusive dynamic shown in a work such as 'The Cloud of Unknowing' and also by the characteristic and pleasingly shaped stone blades of prehistoric times. The 'going beyond' of artistic and poetic expression is an extension of some pleasing rhythm within us, which has within it a partial openness to the living edge of our adaptation, a kind of 'deep truth' beyond scientific facts. The imagination involved in art and its appreciation is enjoyed for the adventure that it is, but it also extends the living edge of our adaptation into the as-yet-unknown, in such a manner that it possibly prefigures ways in which we might become enhanced as an apex species that will not be bypassed by habitat change. This is an even better insurance against extinction than potentially survival-enhancing devices and communications in which we share strategies for survival and well-being based in our own limited capacities.

Armed with imagination in this way, our thought expands into the unknown, inclusively readying our brains for new rhythms ready for change when what lies beyond our present niche requires new responses to emerge. Passing on a style of living and its resonances, draws on creativity yielding profound images and texts that speak to the depths of our being. Poetry and storytelling therefore delight us, particularly when we are young. Our instrumental existence, causing us to specify and make tractable every aspect of our lives, may result in one or other codified religious belief, imitating the cognition found in the sciences, usually based on a limited world view. Thus, the people of Northern Europe have gods and goddesses, forming lineages and political families who war against each other, but also against a common enemy constantly threatening them from beyond the borders of their familiar time and space. The peoples of islands have gods who embody voyaging and discovery, constantly finding in nature a new and unexplored niche where something precious can be nurtured and enhanced, inhabiting and flourishing within patterns of climate in the natural world, hunting and fishing, always 'in sync'

with a delicate balance in relation to which their very existence is precarious and fragile, and yet something to be rejoiced in and within which to resonate with the rhythms of life. These both capture neurocognitive resonances in which we feel at home. It is as if we were made to wrestle, like Jacob with the 'angel of God', until we die to our fears and receive the gifts of Truth, humility, and Freedom, something so valuable that allows us to appreciate life with gratitude, spiritually and morally equipped to think beyond the false images of the age, yet deeply inscribed by our life journeys.

Spiritual 'foolishness' is not cognitive foolishness, although it may seem that way to instrumental reasoning; rather it is a recognition of mysteries which go beyond doing things and touch the foundations of well-being in the world. The *via negativa* in theology marks the inadequacy of human language and linguistically related images to do justice to the way we, as total beings, resonate with the world to which we are fitted and in relation to which our rhythms of life have come to play a part in our neurocognitive interaction with manifest reality. This would be an example of the Kantian 'noumenal' (*Critique of pure reason*) although not 'spooky' but to do with the *psuche* (or soul). To attach some particular scientific or imagistic form to this relationship between our being and the natural environment is not merely an attempt to be cognitively informed, but in fact, to render that relationship in the materialistic and instrumental terms of our own creations and mechanisms. *Via negativa* is not a kind of scepticism, as that way of philosophising also makes the quasi-scientific and instrumental determinations of our cognitive system (and its linguistic articulation) pre-eminent. That would be a kind of idolatry about the credo 'in the beginning was the Word', whereas the *via negativa* is a kind of reverence and humility in acknowledging the limitations of the human mind. It marks out the space where a sense of our being and what is good for our being must take ascendancy over our own inventions and cognitive abstractions.

The limit is the mystic version of heaven recognising romantic love as reflecting our needs. When we avoid allowing our own inventions to take the place of a deity beyond our intellectual reach, our intellectual incompleteness signals that it would be worthwhile for a human being to eschew everything 'evil' and become committed to a 'way of going on' so we live in harmony together.

Symbols, language and narrative provide a cultural niche for each of its individual inhabitants to achieve such a state of integrity in their beliefs and practices. Even children's stories and games ought to be available to allow children to develop brain right resonating with good rhythms and the 'spiritual/noumenal seeds that each of them will need to nurture and grow'.

The art, languages and stories required to nurture this process of truth-seeking ought to be grounded in experiential integrity, passed on from generation to generation in socio-cultural patterns that link brain centres and circuits, creating a neurocognitive map that finds language for the ongoing flow of life towards goodness and all-embracing love (which may seem cruel to self at times of 'turning the other cheek', Matthew 5:39).² The model is given by seeing the divine as sacrificing self and/or an only offspring for others. This grounding for a truth-seeking process manifested as 'revelations' or 'illuminations' of the human mind, shared in the form of storytelling, parables and poetry, will constitute contributions that enrich subsequent generations. This

² Perhaps the '*cruelty interpretation*' is misplaced, since this metaphor may refer to never losing one's centre of peace and cognitive clarity, to respond more effectively to the vicissitudes of life in a peaceful and minimally harmful way, even to violence.

linguistic reservoir becomes the hope that loving elders will nurture the young in order for them to inspire thoughts that breed goodness and sensitivity to the essence or ‘vibe’ of each sentient being or thing in the world, perceived as ‘sacred’ and grounded in family in its own way, just as illustrated in the Australian film ‘The Castle’ (1997).

IV. Emotion, Relationships and ‘the Vibe of the Thing’

To capture the resonance (or ‘vibe’) of a human way of being (or a culture) is more of an art than a science. How do we humans develop to sense ‘goodness’ or ‘holiness’ in others? When we support others in manifesting their best selves, they flourish. Plato sceptically attacked human pretension while retaining reverence for many human beliefs; in that sense, Wittgenstein is his heir. Empathy is involved and relationships based on trust, love and kindness. This seems to be ancient, older and more difficult to conceptualise than systems of morality, such as those many people living in the post-industrial era might cognitively endorse. This ancient way of thinking is exemplified in the story of the woman at the well, whom Jesus touches deeply with his words; she identifies him as the expected Jewish Messiah, despite them being total strangers and her knowing herself to be a ‘sinner’ according to Jewish law. The story reminds us that we can access this kind of attunement to others and the world around us but must do so non-cognitively.

When we see others as labelled by society instead of reacting through the natural rhythms of the brain, we impose linguistic symbols that influence our ‘reactive attitudes’ to them. [24] However, when we look beyond social labels, again exemplified in the story of Mary of Magdala, we encounter forgiveness and we see her not as a ‘prostitute’ but as one who is beloved in the eyes of the Creator, even in the face of human and social criticism and judgment. This greater love and appreciation comes with a recognition of a familiar narrative resonance: interpersonal empathy, words of acceptance, personal transformation, and it depicts human need. We begin to see a lack of appreciation by others, self-worth and a resulting ‘moral deficiency’. This is a woman who needs someone to care for her with real commitment not merely as a sexual object, an object of rejection by society, with a distorted social function. Her need creates and amplifies other needs due to the all too common breakdown in human relationships, so that she threatens partnerships, which should be sites of love and commitment. Jesus’ response to her is the only response she can receive with a healing effect in her tragically damaged life – she finds a love in a way that she had never thought possible. Her response is overwhelming, and transformative.

In its many forms, that social response has been a recurring phenomenon in post-colonial life, famously celebrated in the film ‘Dances with Wolves’ (1990). It also inspires Bob Dylan – “I don’t feel alone, ‘cause I believe in You.” We have learned to both criticise and admire such attitudes in almost equal measure; on the one hand, we see their role at the growing edge of humanity and on the other, we fear the loss of ways of being that have developed within a historical ascendancy of our own socio-political group. These are transformative socio-cultural behaviours that have altered the perception of the other in their vulnerability. Top down configuration of the neurocognitive system is in prospect. We need such ‘reactive attitudes’: love, compassion, and appreciation for the natural environment (even the sacred or natural other/brother/sister, such as ‘brother wolf’).

Acquiring a smattering of indigenous language enhances our sensibilities, as many of us have experienced by learning to understand and use words such as *mana*, *tikanga*, *whakapapa*, *matauranga maori* and *turangawaewae*. In reality, before God we are family. In this complex self-reconfiguration, a way has to be found to discover and cherish what is valuable to our ongoing humanity and to never lose touch with ‘the vibe of the thing’, even catch on to a new way of seeing and acting unfamiliar to us, but particularly apt for the environment in which we find ourselves and which expands our capacities for relationship with each other, both familiar and unfamiliar.

V. Tradition and History: How We Do It Around Here

Folkways are enduring and endearing as they emerge from and preserve ways of being. We feel their pull and they connect us to a history we cherish even as we seek new ways of living and slip into new rhythms. The brain does this in the midst of our endless search for new ways of being. This search for ‘what is not’ in terms of art or history or spirit, is part of our individual affirmations of self in the midst of self-remaking and it imbues each one of us with a unique value, even as we each strive to become a creature of the age with a uniqueness encoded in a singular name and personal his/her-story. Our ways of dealing with others become customary and shared and they generate ethics with all its complexity and lived reality. Folkways have a feel or a vibe about them such that emphases akin to those in Kant’s categorical imperative become relevant: ‘So treat the other that the maxim of thy will might become universal law’ or Jesus’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. This reciprocity is, in short, ‘the sum of the law and the prophets’. It is indeed a universal rule fluid enough to allow many reactive attitudes in the spirit of charity or love for one another. This ‘rhythm’ of dealings with others has been endlessly and repeatedly codified in diverse settings into abstract and aspirational codes of ethics and law. But the transformation, into either ethics or the law, has costs: the folkways when transformed into abstract terms, require the establishment of new rhythms in an otherwise well-attuned brain; so that local knowledge is not privileged, and the abstract point of view and judgement becomes ‘the view from nowhere’ (or nowhere in particular) as Nagel [25] has put it.

Many modern codes of ethics have been derived from different cultural niches and beliefs. Different religious groups appeal to different deities for guidance on conducting the affairs of its members in a just and peaceful manner. However, aspects of the moral codes of some groups are in conflict with the moral codes of other groups, as observed in today’s political and religious agendas amongst different cultural niches active in the world. Truth, Love, Wisdom and Peace have a universal nature, deep within us but at the cultural level there is no consensus. It is either the lack of commitment to universals or the many interpretations of these universals conditioned by culture, language, belief and behaviour, that get us into different ways of being in their attempt to find shared meanings and a synthesis via discursive relationships.

Tradition and history are grounded on meanings and values that are fundamental to the trajectory of the cultural niche and its members via a complex dynamical system of human social networks, and consequently networks of brains producing both individual and collective meanings and values. Some of these are powerfully captured in human dramas such as the crucifixion story. This understanding of the action-perception cycle as described by Freeman [8], the intentional

arc as explained by Merleau-Ponty [26] and the cycle of the creation of knowledge and meaning [21] shifts the paradigm from the ‘neuron doctrine’ to the rhythms of the brain and from metaphysical abstractions to the rhythms of life. In so doing, we acknowledge different human societies of interacting creatures within the natural environment and its noumenal setting. This paradigm shift supports a view of the brain engaged with an environment such that every human being can value and care for it and each other, awakening the spirit necessary for ecological action towards general well-being and the survival of our cultural niche.

Certainly, such a paradigm shift emphasises brain dynamics and generates an acute perception of the beauty within oneself and others, as family together with reverence and gratitude for the gift of life, leading to a conception of ‘the sacred’ and actions that impact the world for good.

VI. Codes of Ethics and Law: the View From No-one in Particular

Our system of ethics, based on an *ethos* is a view of the good. The importance of it being ‘a view’, even if from nowhere (Nagel) or nowhere in particular, crystallises when we turn from the written law or codes of ethics into jurisprudence or a sense of lived ethics/law. One might say that Creation has written the rhythms of life into our being and allowed them to organically generate lore and ethos. When lore and ethos become law and ethics, the brain transforms its view from that of our context and developed identity to that which emerges from imagining the gaze of the other with a different way of being; thus, ultimately it transforms empathy and conceptualises an abstract objectivity - the Law. This is like science in many ways, in that unambiguous and abstract ways of thinking and acting that do not rely on and reflect folkways, must be developed so that we respect the identity and cognition of others. Jesus’ enjoinder asks us to give away the human transformation of our terms of definitive action, unambiguous and accessible to the understanding of all, regardless of their ecological or ethological ways of being.

When Jephthah’s daughter is viewed through a human lens in tune with the divine spirit as that law conceives it, our repulsion and rejection both carry the mark of ways of going on within the human world of love and relationships and our horror at such a tragic event in any family. These dynamic factors enter in when we have been summoned to flexibly and to mercifully apply the law to real life and its rhythms, becoming adept at that wisdom deeply informed by the law and the prophets and the heroic tragedy of Golgotha. That has gradually enabled, in the last 2000 years, billions of people to get in touch with a law that revolves around family, love, the prohibition of killing and reverence for the ground of our being, however that is conceived. Bob Dylan, 2000 years later, does not presume to explain or theologise, he just rejoices and proclaims a sense of being made whole – renewed, restored, in some unintelligible way as if miraculously spared from imminent death and total loss: “Saved, by the blood of the Lamb, yes, I’ve been saved, saved, and I’m so glad, ... I just want to thank you Lord. Thank you Lord.”

Here, in his own way, he launches into, the litany announced by Sadhu Sundar Singh, reflecting a narrative that seems to pulse through many human brains in various ways: a leader who takes on the suffering of the people and suffers on their behalf. This is all the more powerful when the leader is put in the all-powerful position, potentially distant from the evils that flesh is heir to.

This spiritual theme resonates with us and our brain settles into rhythms, which recognise any harshness and judgement of one another as a type of alienation and hostility, enacting a sense of what is caring and even loving of one another. We strive for concepts and thoughts, embodying human rhythms of life and their spirit, not fully aware of their deep inner origin. Our attunement to values like love, unity and humour moves us even though we cannot explain that resonance in quasi-scientific conceptions based on functional machines or their digital progeny.

The assembled voices of humanity presented their case to God as the only condition in which he could prescribe what counted as human goodness. ‘You must become a human being, of humble and marginalised lineage. You must only do good and speak good and yet be unjustly condemned and excluded by society. You must die a painful human death. Only then can you be our spiritual guide and authority’, the one who decrees to the four winds while alive, ‘thy kingdom come’, and trust that paradise’s values would be already landing to be embodied gradually by some and eventually by every member of your human family at the Omega Point, the destination of *via positiva~via negativa*.

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