

**Negative Theology:  
From Anthropomorphism to Apophaticism**  
Teologia negatywna: Od antropomorfizmu do apofatyizmu

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## **EDITORIAL/OD REDAKCJI**







## A Positive Side to Apophaticism: Prolegomena

MAREK GILSKI 

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**Abstract:** The article synthetically presents positive aspects of apophaticism. It discusses its apologetic role, its importance in defending against magical thinking, its focus on experience, its openness to pluralism, and its inspirational role for a variety of disciplines in delimiting their cognitive boundaries. Some of the most important conclusions are: a) apophaticism played an important role in the early days of Christianity in polemics against both pagan cults and magical tendencies; b) already in ancient Greece apophaticism influenced the search not only for symbolic interpretations of Homer's poems but also for religious experience; c) the limits of cognition discovered by theology are becoming a contemporary experience of other sciences (mathematics, physics).

**Keywords:** apophaticism, apology, religious experience, magic, pluralism, limitative theorems

Apophaticism in this article is understood, as proposed by Waclaw Hryniewicz, not only as a language used to speak about God, but more than that – as a dimension and method of theological thinking.<sup>1</sup> The first examples of apophaticism conceptualized in this way are found as early as ancient Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is where one should look for the genesis of apophaticism found in the Old Testament. While in the Greek language, it is most common to associate the origins of this type of thinking with Plato or Pythagoreanism, some elements of apophaticism are present as early as Homer's poems. In the pages of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the gods are most often (more than 160 times) referred to by the negative term “immortals” (ἀθάνατοι), as opposed to humans who are called “mortals” (θνητοί).<sup>3</sup> When terminology indicating man's resemblance to a god appears, it foreshadows the death of man, something alien to the Homeric gods.<sup>4</sup> Thus, one who is similar to the gods is one who is absolutely unlike them. From the beginning, Homeric anthropomorphism went hand in hand

<sup>1</sup> Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutika w dialogu*, 51.

<sup>2</sup> A text by an anonymous Egyptian poet in English translation: “He is not seen; He hath neither minister nor offerings; He is not worshipped in temples; His dwelling is not known. No shrine of His hath painted images. There is no habitation which may hold Him. Unknown is His name in heaven, and His form is not manifested, for every image of Him is in vain. His home is in the universe, not in any dwelling made by human hands.” (Jugrin, “Negative Theology,” 151).

<sup>3</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods*, 65; Heath, *The Bible, Homer*, 76, 217.

<sup>4</sup> Heath, *The Bible, Homer*, 22.

with apophatic thinking. Examples of a similar perspective can be found in Greek drama. Aeschylus, in his tragedy *Agamemnon* (vv. 160–162), treats Zeus as an inefable grandeur. “He is a god for whom it is difficult to find a name and whose essence is difficult to put into words.”<sup>5</sup>

Even if Greek philosophers produced theoretical justifications for apophaticism, it had already been present in epic depictions and drama several centuries earlier. Werner Jaeger emphasized that the very ideas that are found in philosophical treatises often have already existed before in poetry: “What Homer’s epic has in common with Greek philosophy is the fact that they both present the structure of reality in its entirety, though philosophy present in the rational form where the epos shows it in mythical form.”<sup>6</sup>

Jewish literature, too, is imbued with apophatic thinking, as can be seen, both in the Old Testament and in the works of such philosophers as Philo of Alexandria, writing in Greek, who treats biblical anthropomorphic images of God as “useful lies of Moses.”<sup>7</sup>

The nascent Christianity drew inspiration from the cultural achievements of the time. Hence, it is not surprising that apophaticism has established itself in Christian theology from its very beginnings.

It might seem surprising if one speaks of a positive side to apophaticism. This is because the Greek term ἀπόφασις expresses the idea of negation and contradiction. It would seem that a positive thing is to assert, to define, rather than to negate, undermine or contradict. And yet the history of theological thought proves that apophatic thinking opened theology to original approaches and gave impetus to new explorations. This article aims to show the positive role that apophaticism played in the past and continues to play today.

Publications that discuss the subject of apophaticism have either an introductory character<sup>8</sup> or demonstrate the development of apophatic ideas in history,<sup>9</sup> or they present an author or some narrow issue in detail.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to find a synthetic account that would panoramically present the role that apophaticism played and continues to play. The present publication seeks to address this gap.

It is not the purpose of this article to cite all statements on the role of apophaticism, but rather to provide a panorama based on selected texts, giving insight into the most important functions of apophatic thinking has performed and continues to perform. Due to the nature of this paper, the method of synthesis was used, selecting

<sup>5</sup> Chodkowski, *Ajschylos*, 372–380.

<sup>6</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, 429.

<sup>7</sup> Mrugalski, “Bóg niezdolny do gniewu,” 282–290.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., Mortley, *From Word to Silence*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g., Brugarolas, “La «conspiración» de los contrarios.”

from the entire theological and philosophical tradition examples representative of the issues addressed.

This article is structured according to five functions of apophatic thinking: its apologetic role, its anti-magical role, that of orientation to religious experience, that of opening to pluralism, and that of inspiring various disciplines of knowledge to define their cognitive boundaries.

## 1. Apology

Both in the books of the New Testament and the works of early Christian writers, there is a wealth of examples of apophatic thinking. God, whom no one has ever seen (John 1:18) and who dwells in inaccessible light (1 Tim 6:16), is known only to the Son, who can reveal Him (John 1:18). It is only through revelation that God becomes knowable to some extent.

Early Christian apologists emphasized the absolute otherness of God in comparison to creation. The foundation for this way of thinking was laid by Justin Martyr.<sup>11</sup> In one of the earliest Christian texts addressing this issue, the author of *Apology* wrote:

We do not worship with many sacrifices and floral offerings the things men have made (μορφώσαντες), set in temples, and called gods. We know that they are inanimate and lifeless and have not the form (μορφήν) of God (for we do not think that God has that form (μορφήν) which some say they reproduce in order to give honor to Him) – but have the names (ὀνόματα) and shapes (σχήματα) of those evil demons who have appeared [to men]. Why should we tell you, who already know, into what different shapes the workmen fashion their material, by carving, cutting, molding, and hammering? From vessels destined for vile purposes, by merely changing their shape and by skillfully giving them a new form (μορφωποιήσαντες), they often make what they call (ἐπονομάζουσιν) gods. Thus, His name is applied (ἐπονομάζεται) to corruptible things that need constant care. This, we think, is not only stupid (ἄλογον) but also disrespectful (ὕβρει) to God, who is of ineffable (ἄρρητον) glory and form (μορφήν).<sup>12</sup>

According to Justin, things made by humans do not have the shape of the true God. He calls attempts to make images of Him and refer to them as “God” an unintelligent (ἄλογον) action and considers it a manifestation of pride that insults the true God. Here he uses the term ὕβρις, which the Greeks used to describe the greatest sin

<sup>11</sup> Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Iustinus Martyr, *1 Apol.* 9.

when man forgot who he was and tried to usurp what was beyond his reach. Such arrogance breeds blindness and leads to disaster.<sup>13</sup> The author of *Apology* believes that such ὑβρις manifests itself in the attempts to describe the Divine glory and shape in human words.

There are three ways in which Justin opposes any action that would seek to express in words the truth about God. Not only does he consider such action irrational (ἄλογον), but also impossible (ἄρρητον) and unlawful (ὑβρις).

In his view, even the terms commonly used in relation to God: “Father,” “God,” “Creator,” “Lord,” “Ruler,” are not names (ὀνόματα) of God. They describe His works and not His nature. Justin believes that only someone older than God could give Him a name. And since God is uncreated, this is impossible. The name “God” is only a human representation of a reality that cannot be described. It has a mysterious meaning, impossible to know (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν).<sup>14</sup>

The thought of the author of *Apology*, emphasizing both the uncreatedness of God – which differentiates Him from everything that exists in the world – and the inadequacy of human language to describe the reality of the Divine, would be creatively continued by later authors (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen),<sup>15</sup> emphasizing that the universe was created *ex nihilo*.<sup>16</sup> This idea would permanently enter Christian theological thought.

One of the main purposes behind emphasizing the differences between God and the world and stressing that the world was not created from some primordial matter, but from nothing, was the apologia of the one true God. The consequence of these theses was to undermine attempts to deify any created thing. No created thing can be God. Thus apophatic thought performed an apologetic function. The development of negative theology, emphasizing the successive differences between God and the created world, made it possible to criticize both pagan cults, based on Greek or Roman mythology, and some philosophical orientations that suggested partial knowability of God. Thus, the worship of humans, animals, plants, the earth, and any works made with human hands, etc., was the worship of idols, not of the true God.<sup>17</sup> Apophatic theology proved to be an important weapon against both idolatry and certain philosophical orientations, such as the pagan middle Platonists.<sup>18</sup>

Apophatic thinking played a significant role not only in the polemic against the deification of the created world but also against heresies that emerged from Christianity. A variety of Gnostic factions have endeavored to explain all issues related to the nature of God, His origin, and action. Although the founders of Gnostic

13 Chodkowski, *Ajschylos*, 383.

14 Iustinus Martyr, *2 Apol.* 6.

15 Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 43–44.

16 Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 11–15.

17 Turner, “Apophaticism,” 24–25.

18 Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 46. Origen argued with Celsus who was a middle Platonist.

heresies referred to apophatic terminology, they invoked the knowledge of God who revealed everything to them.<sup>19</sup>

Their views are referred to by the author of the largest patristic catalog of heresies, Epiphanius of Salamis. In his work *Panarion* he refers to apophaticism as an important tool in the fight against the Gnostics. For example, he is critical of the Marcosians who attempted to describe both the Father and the Divine Logos using figures, numbers and structural elements.<sup>20</sup>

Epiphanius wrote:

And your reduction of the Lord of all, who established the heavens, to 888, like the alphabet; your subdivision even of the Father himself, who contains all things and yet is uncontained (ἀχώρητον), into a tetrad, an ogdoad, a decad and a dodecad; and your explanation of the ineffability and inconceivability (τὸ ἄρρητον καὶ ἀεννόητον), as you say, of the Father by multiplications like these? You make the essence and subsistence of the One you call incorporeal (ἄσώματον) and without essence (ἀνούσιον) out of many letters, with new letters generated by others, though you yourself were the false Daedalus and the bad sculptor of the power before the all-highest! And by subdividing the essence you say is indivisible (ἀμέριστον) into mutes, vowels and voiced consonants, and falsely attributing their voicelessness to the Father of all and his Ennoia, you have thrust all who trust you into the very height of blasphemy and the greatest impiety.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in the case of Marcosians, apophaticism is more of a declarative nature rather than actual one. Hand in hand with the wealth of negative terminology they used there went the explication of all divine mysteries. Epiphanius points out to Marcosians the contradiction between their declarations and reality, criticizing their attempts to explain what is inaccessible to the human mind. He accuses the Marcosians of blasphemy and impiety.

Apophatic thinking played an important role in polemics against heresies that questioned the eternal begetting of the Son of God. In the case of the Eunomians, there are claims to a precise description of the Divine essence and therefore attempts at a rationalist approach to the Holy Trinity.<sup>22</sup> In polemic with them, Gregory of Nyssa developed the idea of God's infinity by "placing the life" of the Son within it.<sup>23</sup> The reference to God's infinity made it possible to maintain the distinction between the Father and the Son and their unity at the same time. Within the framework of infinity, there can be no discussion about what is greater and what is smaller.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 4, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 11, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34, 11, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 26–27.

<sup>23</sup> Weedman, "The Polemical Context," 84.

<sup>24</sup> Weedman, "The Polemical Context," 102–104.

Apophatic categories helped to find arguments against heresies trying to take an overly rationalistic approach to the mystery of God.

Against the background of these reflections, a question that arises is: Is not the contemporary return to ancient mythologies and deification of created things the aftermath of the neglect of apologetics based on apophatic thinking?

## 2. Defense Against Magic

Justin's reflections on the inadequacy of names also served an additional role in combating magical tendencies which were a challenge faced not only by the pagan world but also by the Christian one. The fact that this was not an easy struggle is evidenced by the involvement of secular authorities and legislation to limit the influence of magic. This was already true of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Magic uses words and formulas to which it attributes extraordinary power. Numerous terms for God (Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Sabaoth) are found in Christian Magical Papyri.<sup>26</sup> One can also find there the text of the *Our Father* prayer or entire pericopes of the Gospel. Quoting Gospel passages was meant to help make an event (such as an instance of healing) happen again. Magical texts refer to the Gospel of St. Matthew as a healing text.<sup>27</sup> These positive epithets referring to God, prayers, or Gospel pericopes would typically be used for healing or warding off some evil.

In almost every papyrus, there are either epithets referring to God or references to His name. The name seems to have a causal effect and everything is accomplished by its power (διὰ τὸ ὄνομα). The Christian Papyri attribute magical power to the name (ὄνομα) of God on more than one occasion. It is described as: "great" (μέγα), "holy" (ἅγιον), "admirable" (θαυμαστόν), "full of glory" (ὑπερένδοξον), "terrible to opponents" (φοβερὸν τοῖς ὑπεναντίοις) and "unspeakable" (ἀμύθητον).<sup>28</sup>

However, the inadequacy of names to describe the nature of God, emphasized by Christian authors, undermined the theoretical foundation for formulating spells. Magic formulas did not reflect reality, which nullified their effectiveness. It is difficult to assess the impact of this type of theology of names on early Christianity. However, it is a fact that apophatic theology was a powerful voice against magic. It was undermining its foundations. Perhaps this is why authors of the Magical Papyri are

<sup>25</sup> In Rome, the oldest codifications (the Laws of the Twelve Tables) already addressed the issue of magic. As for Greece, there is much less evidence. Wypustek, *Magia antyczna*, 322–340; Collins, *Magic*, 132–165.

<sup>26</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 201–230.

<sup>27</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 211; Meyer – Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Gilski, "Chrześcijańskie papirusy magiczne," 92–93.

perceived to be uneducated people, as evidenced by the not particularly elaborate, non-literary language of the texts, often with incorrect morphology and syntax.<sup>29</sup>

Apophatic theology played a purifying role in early Christianity, helping to protect it from the taint of other cults and offered a weapon against magic.

The problem has returned with a vengeance in the era of iconoclastic disputes. The debates surrounding icons in the 8th and 9th centuries revealed that among Christians, images of God, Jesus Christ, angels, and saints were at risk of being treated magically. The debates of the Second Council of Nicea revealed some abuses concerning icons. They were treated by some Christians analogously to pagan idols. Women had representations of saints on their dresses, icons were taken as godparents, liturgy was celebrated on icons instead of altars, and even paint from icons was added to consecrated wine.<sup>30</sup> Descriptions of the miraculous effects of icons prove that the scale of these phenomena was not marginal.<sup>31</sup> Iconoclasm was an expression of extremely apophatic thinking, challenging even the incarnation. Ultimately, the trend of balanced apophaticism came to the fore during the Council. One can make paintings and worship them. Incarnation is the fundamental rationale that allows the painting of icons of Jesus Christ. The worship of an icon, however, is not the worship of either wood, mosaic or paint, but of the person who is depicted on it. The veneration given to the image passes to the prototype.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is about the worship of the person, not the worship of matter.

The fathers of the Second Council of Nicea used the achievements of Christian theology. The inadequacy of names in relation to God did not result in a ban on writing theological treatises. It only provided an important perspective, allowing one to approach with a high dose of caution any truth about God expressed in human language. *Per analogiam*, it was not forbidden to create icons, but only a perspective was provided that moved thinking about images from the realm of matter to that of interpersonal relationships.

Christianity of the first millennium was faced with two fundamental areas of magic: the magic of words and the magic of figurative representations. Apophatic thinking was the answer given to these two tendencies. The question that arises in this context is – Is it not the case that the contemporary interest in esotericism and magical practices is a symptom of insufficient emphasis on apophatic thinking? The issues related to the contribution of apophatic thinking to magical tendencies have not been discussed in any scientific analysis to date.

<sup>29</sup> Wypustek, *Magia antyczna*, 22–23.

<sup>30</sup> Łukaszuk, *Obraz święty*, 46–47; Maguire, “Magic in the Christian Image,” 51–71.

<sup>31</sup> Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Lamberz, *Concilium Universale Nicaenum Secundum*, 826.

### 3. Orientation Toward Experience

The inability to describe the nature of God and the inadequacy of human concepts to describe divine reality resulted in the search for new ways to perceive God. That was the situation even long before Christianity. Gods that were invisible and indescribable by means of any human language could be experienced at the level of emotions or experience. Thus, the apophatic tendency resulted in an increasing popularity of mystery cults. The realm of feelings, human emotions, and extraordinary experience was what made it possible to personally touch the untouchable, for an instant grasp the incomprehensible. The ancient mystery cults owed their popularity to this approach.

The Classical era saw a breakthrough in the religiosity of the Greeks. It had both an intellectual and spiritual dimension. The development of philosophical thought fostered either a departure from traditional religion based on the Homeric tradition or an allegorical interpretation of Homer's poems. At the same time, the mystery cults that were gaining popularity (the Eleusinian mysteries, the Dionysian movement, and Orphism) offered closer and more intimate contact with the deity, including the complete union with the god proposed by the Orphists.<sup>33</sup> The ancient Greeks, long before the advent of Christianity, were aware of the limitations of their ability to know their deities, which is why many of them sought religious experience in mystery cults.

On many occasions, the Church Fathers expressed their belief in the primary role of experience over verbal explanation. This was particularly true of the sacraments. Such an approach reflects apophatic thinking, where the word is secondary and can even hinder religious experience.

And this is why St. Ambrose wrote:

On questions of right conduct we discoursed daily at the time when the lives of the patriarchs or the precepts of the Proverbs were being read, in order that, trained and instructed thereby, you might become accustomed to walk in the paths of our elders and to tread in their steps, and to obey the divine oracles; to the end that you might, after being renewed by baptism, continue to practise the life which befitted the regenerate. Now the season reminds us to speak about the mysteries, and to give a reasoned account (*rationem*) of the sacraments; for if we had thought that such an account should be propounded before baptism to the uninitiated, we should be esteemed traitors rather than teachers; furthermore, because it were better that the light of the mysteries (*lux mysteriorum*) should reveal itself (*infuderit*) unasked and unexpected than preceded by some discourse (*sermo aliquis*).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Banek, *Mistycy i bezbożnicy*, 50, 173–174; Cosmopoulos, *Bronze Age Eleusis*, 17–24.

<sup>34</sup> Ambrosius, *Myst.* I, 1–2.



Not only does the Bishop of Milan emphasize the practice of the Church to prioritize religious experience before explaining certain truths and rituals, but he also regards such a method of acting as appropriate, producing better results (*melius*) than if the opposite approach was taken. He uses the word “penetrate” (*infundere*) in this context. The sacraments of Christian initiation were preceded, as Ambrose points out, by an ethical lecture based on biblical examples. However, they were not intended as an explanation of liturgical rites. Thus, the word about God (*sermo*) is not only secondary to the light (*lux*) that penetrates the person receiving the sacraments of Christian initiation but can also hinder the perception of that light. Both the explanation (*sermo*) and the search for essence (*ratio*) follow the experience of religious experience (*lux*).

Since the beginning of Christianity, the question of religious experience has held a privileged position with regard to attempts to describe the mystery of man’s encounter with God. Over time, through the Council of Chalcedon, a framework was developed for talking about how man can experience God. The negative terms that appear in it that describe the relationship between the two natures in Christ (ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀχωρίστως),<sup>35</sup> are characteristic for the relationship between divinity and humanity. Thus, they refer to how a person can experience God. The closeness of God and man never leads to blending, some form of dissolution of man in God, or a change in divine or human nature. Man does not cease to be man, and God does not cease to be God. The Chalcedonian dogma laid down a certain framework for talking about the closeness of God and man.

Apophatic theology directed human reflection to the track of religious experience. As an outcome of this trend come descriptions of the experiences of mystics: whether it be Rhineland mysticism (Meister Eckhart), or Spanish mystics (St. John of the Cross).<sup>36</sup> The point of reference for recognizing their authenticity will be the doctrine promulgated at the Council of Chalcedon to distinguish true mystical experiences from false pseudo-experiences.

Hence, apophatic theology played and continues to play an important role in the process of verifying the authenticity of mystical experiences. This raises the question: aren’t modern apostasies the result of too little emphasis on apophaticism and the associated appreciation of religious experience?

<sup>35</sup> Regarding the history and meaning of the terms, cf. Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 83–84.

<sup>36</sup> Hewitt, *Negative Theology*, 11–13. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 244–248.

#### 4. Openness to Pluralism

Negative theology and philosophy have become a strong stimulus for exploration and research since antiquity. After all, it turns out that negative language has opened up very wide fields of research. While pointing to boundaries that should not be crossed, it leaves considerable space for exploration. And this paves the way for a plurality of solutions.

At the outset, it is worth noting that some negative terms have undergone an evolution in their interpretation. This is the case, for example, of the concept of “infinity” (ἄπειρον, ἀπειρία). The term has evolved from a negative to a positive meaning.<sup>37</sup> Certain concepts, although expressed in negative language, have a positive meaning. This is the case, for example, with the concept of “not becoming mixed up with” (ἀσυγχύτως). The First Council of Constantinople, in Canon 2, forbade the bishops of one province from “becoming mixed up with” (μηδὲ συγχέειν) the affairs of other provinces. That concerned administrative matters.<sup>38</sup> By the same token, in the interpretation of the council, the term has a positive, organizing nature. Other negative terms have ambivalent meanings, depending on the context. This is the case with the term ἀδιαίρετως used by the Council of Chalcedon. The term was known from the Ephesian *Formula of Peace*. The participle διαιρῶντας, used in its positive form, referred to the role of theologians, able to distinguish, between what pertains to divine nature and what pertains to human nature.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the context delineates the semantic field of the term. As heresies attempted to introduce divisions – whether between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament (Marcion), or in the Trinity (Arians, Sabellians), or in Christ (Apolinarians) – the term acquired a negative connotation.<sup>40</sup>

Concepts, and among them ἀσυγχύτως cited above, often mark boundary points, opening up perspectives for exploration. Not becoming “mixed up with” can mean a variety of models of relationships. It may indicate some form of interpenetration, cooperation, harmony, divinization, etc. A negative term opens up a wide range of possibilities for exploration.

Not surprisingly, subsequent Councils of the Church, continuing the thinking present at the Council of Chalcedon, gave impetus to further interpretations of the concept. The canons of the Second Council of Constantinople provide the following interpretation of the relationship of the two natures in Christ:

37 Mrugalski, “*Agnostos theos*,” 34–48.

38 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 59–60.

39 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 84.

40 Gilski – Cholewa, *Język soborów*, 84.

If anyone saying ‘in two natures’ does not profess the one Jesus Christ our Lord to be acknowledged in Godhead and manhood, in order to signify by this the difference of the natures from which the ineffable (ἄφραστος) union took place without merger, and without either the Word being changed into the nature of the flesh or the flesh transformed into the nature of the Word (for each remains what it is by nature even after the hypostatic union), but understands this expression in respect of the mystery of Christ in terms of a division into parts or, while professing the number of natures in respect of the same, one Jesus Christ our Lord, God the Word incarnate, does not understand the difference of these elements from which he was compounded to be in perception alone ... let him be anathema.<sup>41</sup>

The conciliar text introduces the category of impossibility expressed by the *adiectivum verbale* ἄφραστος. This union of two natures without their becoming mixed up is impossible to describe. Thus, there is an indication of the boundaries for theological expression. It is impossible to express in words the nature of the union of natures in Christ.

Not only philosophy and theology but also the official teaching of the Councils since the Council of Chalcedon contain a fair amount of apophaticism which would be commented on and developed by subsequent Councils.

The Fourth Council of Constantinople (869), citing the Second Council of Nicea and collecting together its statements scattered in various points, took an important step forward and presented the figure of Jesus Christ in the language of paradox: “Likewise we recognize that the seventh holy ecumenical council, the second to be held at Nicaea, pronounced orthodox doctrine when it professed one and the same Christ and Lord, invisible and visible, incomprehensible and comprehensible, infinite and finite, impassible and passible, indescribable and describable.”<sup>42</sup>

Apophatic thinking found on the pages of the documents of the Councils of the first millennium, evolved not only in the sense that certain concepts changed their meaning but also developed from pointing out the limits of orthodox thinking to specifying the limits of language and then using the language of paradox.

This raises the question of whether too little emphasis on apophaticism results in too much absolutization of particular approaches and systems and the resulting limited ability to think in terms of ecumenism and dialogue.

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<sup>41</sup> Straub, *Concilium Universale*, 217.

<sup>42</sup> “Sicut etiam septimam sanctam et universalem in Nicaea secundo celebratam synodum orthodoxe dogmatizasse novimus, unum et eundem Christum dominum invisibilem et visibilem professam, et incomprehensibilem et comprehensibilem, et incircumscriptum et circumscriptum, impassibilem etiam et passibilem, atque inscriptibilem et scriptibilem.” (Leonardi – Placanica, *Gesta sanctae*, 339–340).

## 5. Inspiring Various Scientific Disciplines for Defining Their Cognitive Boundaries

Despite the progress of science, the existing world remains a mystery. What was the experience of ancient philosophy and theology also becomes to some extent the experience of exact sciences. This can be seen especially in the areas of mathematics and physics.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was a widespread belief among people of science that neither mathematics nor physics had its limitations and that in a short time, all controversial issues would be solved.<sup>43</sup> The early 20th century showed how wrong they were. It turned out that mathematics has its limitations. Limitative theorems helped to point to the limits of science. This is especially true of Gödel's theorems.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it turns out that rich logical systems contain propositions that cannot be derived from the axioms of the system. It is not possible to simultaneously determine the incompleteness and non-contradiction of rich logical systems.<sup>45</sup> The problem is not that it cannot be done today, but that it is impossible to do it. What it is about, is a limitation that is not caused by external factors and is not possible to overcome. This leads to one of the limits of science.

A similar situation is encountered at the level of quantum physics. According to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, it is impossible to know the present moment in all its possible determinants. Accurate measurement of a particle's momentum or its coordinates combines an objective element with a subjective decision. Every observation is a form of choice that limits future possibilities.<sup>46</sup> Although exact sciences seem to be completely objective, apparently, the element of subjectivity also plays an important role in them.

Analogous is the Löwenheim–Skolem theorem, which points to an unexpected property of language. There are certain impassable limits of description. A set of axioms introduced to describe simple structures can also constitute a correct description of a completely different domain. Therefore, this represents some form of linguistic blurring.<sup>47</sup> Language also has its limitations.

Not only theology, but also mathematics, physics, and language have their limits to cognition. Discovering more limits is probably only a matter of time. It is difficult to say to what extent negative theology, using *adiectiva verbalia*, which often emphasize limits and inaccessibility, can inspire other disciplines of knowledge, especially exact sciences. Their impressive development may give rise to the belief that no cognitive boundaries exist at all.

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<sup>43</sup> Życiński, *Elementy filozofii nauki*, 355–357.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion of Gödel's theorem, cf. Krajewski, *Twierdzenie Gödla*.

<sup>45</sup> Liana, "Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja," 147.

<sup>46</sup> Liana, "Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja," 149–150.

<sup>47</sup> Życiński, *Elementy filozofii nauki*, 366–372.

Limitative theorems are a harbinger that what theological reflection is grappling with can also be a challenge to other disciplines of knowledge. The emphasis on the mystery of God, found in theology, is gaining confirmation in other sciences. Not only God but also man and the world hide their secrets inaccessible to human cognition.

This raises the question: to what extent do the limitations faced by theology concern the deepest structure of the created world and will therefore become further challenges for exact sciences in the future?

## Summary

The contribution of apophatic theology can be seen in various areas of theology, philosophy, or culture at large. What the contemporary apophatic reflection is missing is a thorough discussion of Greek literature from before Plato and Pythagoras: be it Homer's poems or Greek tragedy. All too easily does modern reflection reduce the theology present on the pages of the oldest monuments of Greek writing to anthropomorphic theology, when, meanwhile, the gods, who take on various human shapes, are not mere phantoms but persons who can be touched, hurt, and caused pain. Immortals, however, are separated from mortals by the chasm of death. None of the gods of Greek mythology could die, however, a mortal could become immortal.<sup>48</sup> Thus, even the oldest Greek written texts contain simultaneously anthropomorphic and apophatic depictions, combining them harmoniously. Anthropomorphism and apophaticism are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

For centuries, it was reflection on God that was imbued with apophatic thinking. With the Council of Chalcedon, negative theology extended its interest to reflection on the relationship between God and man. Today, one can speak of apophatic anthropology. However, there is a lack of thinking and speaking in apophatic terms about, for example, Mariology or other theological treatises. It would seem that apophatic thinking still has new unexplored spaces to explore. Even a superficial look at the terminology cited in the *Corpus Marianum Patristicum* reveals a significant number of negative terms used by the first centuries of Christianity to describe the Mother of Our Lord.<sup>49</sup> This subject matter is not addressed in contemporary literature.

Apophaticism is not an expression of scientific helplessness, the result of internalizing religion, or a fascination with Eastern religions. It is an expression of a search so advanced that it reaches the limits of cognition. Not only is this type of thinking not

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<sup>48</sup> Drzyżdżyk, *Chrystologia*, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Campos, *Corpus Marianum patristicum*.

self-destructive and does not have to be so,<sup>50</sup> but it can contribute to the development of not only theology or philosophy but also culture and even exact sciences.

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Research into the origins of apophatic thinking shows that it has accompanied man in various forms since times immemorial. It is found as early as in the oldest known testimonies of European writing, such as Homer's epics, which, despite obvious anthropomorphizations, show the gods as having a nature different from that of mortals. Also, the earliest Greek philosophers, although they inherited the polytheistic and anthropomorphic Homeric "faith," sometimes spoke out in a very harsh tone against the idea of gods "made in the image of man." The recognition of God as an absolutely incorporeal and transcendent entity, which was implemented in the systems of Plato and Aristotle, did not mark the end of apophaticism; on the contrary, it became the starting point for negative theology, which developed with great vigor in Neo-Platonic doctrines, those of pagans (Plotinus, Proclus), but also those of Christians (Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor). The apophatic thought of the East was also taken up and developed by great Western theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart. Nowadays, it is experiencing its heyday, the reasons for which may be manifold: a growing awareness of religious pluralism, the mood of atheistic secularism present in many modern societies and the associated aversion to traditional religious beliefs and values, or the postmodern fondness for categories such as: "difference," "absence," and "otherness."<sup>51</sup> These circumstances encourage theologians and philosophers to re-think the issues related to apophaticism.

The editors of *Verbum Vitae* have decided to engage in the ongoing contemporary debate by proposing a rather broad topic, "Negative Theology: From Anthropomorphism to Apophaticism," to allow the broadest possible range of scholars to take part in it. Articles submitted from a wide range of academic centers, both abroad (Australia, USA, UK) and in Poland, present a broad spectrum of issues. They include biblical, theological, philosophical, religious-study, historical, philological, logical, as well as anthropological perspectives. As it turns out, apophaticism can be found in various religions, various Christian denominations, a variety of philosophical orientations, and even in various disciplines of knowledge. It seems to be an essential feature in human thinking in general, not only about God, but also about man and the world.

The submitted texts refer to ancient, medieval, as well as modern times. Some publications focus on the presentation of apophaticism emerging from the pages

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<sup>50</sup> Scott – Citron, "What is Apophaticism?," 23.

<sup>51</sup> Por. Davies – Turner, *Silence and the Word*, 1–2.

of Scripture, analyzing whether its relevance to understanding God or Old Testament theophanies as interpreted by Philo of Alexandria;<sup>52</sup> others reveal the apophatic thinking of ancient writers from Plato to John of Damascus.<sup>53</sup> The achievements of medieval literature are presented from the perspective of Islam as well as Dante and Palamas.<sup>54</sup> Much space is devoted to analyses of contemporary reflection on apophaticism shown from the perspective of either philosophy or theology, or even logic. Some take the form of a detailed analysis of a narrow issue,<sup>55</sup> while others are in the form of synthesis.<sup>56</sup> Despite such a broad spectrum of issues addressed, they do not exhaust the entire breadth of thinking in terms of apophaticism. Rather, they point out directions that can inspire further scientific inquiry.

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## ARTICLES/ARTYKUŁY



# Negative Theology as an Expression of God's Freedom in *the Torah of the Book of Deuteronomy* and Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible

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**Abstract:** This paper traces the history of the negative theology of YHWH from the beginning of the integration of YHWH into the Canaanite pantheon to the post-exilic period in the Torah through the interpretation of the Sh'ma' Israel from its mono-Yahwistic understanding to monotheism as an expression of God's freedom. In the second step, the development of negative theology is traced from the pre-exilic proverbs, which understand God as a limit of knowledge, to negative theology in the Book of Job and Qohelet, as well as the overcoming of negative theology in the paradise-narrative in Genesis 2–3 through the freedom of choice granted to man by God.

**Keywords:** negative theology, monotheism, mono-Yahwism, monolatry, henotheism, biblical epistemology, Proverbs, gnomic apperception, Ecclesiastes, Job, good and evil, paradise-narrative

## 1. God's Transcendence and Non-Worldliness as Expression for His Freedom in the *Texts of the Book of Deuteronomy which show the Development of a Negative Theology of Monotheism as an Expression of Divine Transcendence*

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of God in linguistic figures of negative theology, it is about the linguistic expression of God's transcendence and superiority to the world, with the primary focus not being on God's separateness from the world and the resulting impossibility to define God's attributes, features or to make statements about the divine essence. Rather, it is about God's freedom, which is not to be restricted by human wishful projections from a mythical worldview. As the non-worldly and transcendent God who is not a function of human desires, He cuts through all human-mythical desire projections by virtue of His divine freedom.

From the beginning of the religious history of YHWH as the God of Israel, He was, as a God from the desert in the south, a stranger in His Canaanite context in the Promised Land who, as a desert God was not an autochthonous weather God from Palestine<sup>1</sup> but was integrated as a stranger into the Canaanite-Mythic pantheon

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Koch, "Übersiedlung," 171–209; Leuenberger, "Herkunft," 1–19; Römer, *Erfindung*, 53–64; Miller, *Origin*, 61–92; *pace* Pfeiffer, *Kommen*; Müller, *Wettergott*.

and subordinated to the God El, as is still the case in Ps 89:6–8 and texts from the 9th–8th-century caravanserai of *Kuntillet 'Ağrud*. There, God is differentiated in individual manifestations of “YHWH of Samaria” and “YHWH of Teman.”<sup>2</sup> The foreign, non-autochthonous god YHWH, however, was able to free Himself from the grip and subordination into the Syrian-Canaanite pantheon. As a reaction to this divine act of emancipation, the Sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel is formulated in Deut 6:4–5 and with it, the first approach of the development towards a negative theology: “Hear Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH is one. You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your strength of your soul and with all your might.”

The history of the understanding of Sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel from the pre-exilic period of the 7th century as the opening of a primal pre-exilic Deuteronomy (“Urdeuteronomium”) in Deut 12–26; 28\* to the post-exilic period of the 4th century, reflects the shift in the understanding of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible from a mono-Yahwism that overcame the disintegration of YHWH into numerous manifestations to a monolatrous and monotheistic understanding. The change in how God was understood in the Hebrew Bible from mono-Yahwism in the 7th century to a monolatrous-henotheistic understanding in the 6th century (which overcame the disintegration of YHWH into numerous manifestations) to the assertion of monotheism in the post-exilic period in the 5th/4th century, reflects the development of negative theology in the Hebrew Bible. Negative theology in the Bible, which emphasizes God’s otherness and transcendence, is rooted in the foreignness of YHWH in relation to His Canaanite environment in the history of religion so that the emancipation from the quasi-mythical embrace by the religion-historical environment after His transfer to the Promised Land gives birth to impulses that were later developed into those of world-delimitation and world-otherness.

The sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel consists of two nominal clauses in Deut 6:4 after a call for Israel to listen:

יהוה אלהינו

יהוה אחד

The first nominal clause יהוה אלהינו enters into a relationship with the second יהוה אחד as an explanation, in which אחד is a predicate, which here originally, as in Gen 2:24, has the semantic connotation of “unity” in the sense of “wholeness,” so that the Sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel is to be interpreted mono-Yahwistically. In addition, אחד could also gain the meaning “only one,” for Deut 6:4 to be interpreted monolatrically or monotheistically. The decision as to which of the two interpretations is correct is based on the respective literary context in which the sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel is embedded. Deut 6:4b יהוה אחד is a mono-Yahwistic confessional formula expressing that YHWH is *one* who is not disintegrated into a multitude of local manifestations and cannot be locally differentiated and thus manipulated. As the introductory

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Miller, *Origin*, 61–68.

sentence of the pre-exilic “Urdeuteronomium” of the 7th century, the Sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel – as an expression of the unity of God in an act of confession – is connected with the basic concern of the pre-exilic Deuteronomy, the centralization of the sacrificial cult at one sanctuary, according to Deut 12\*, which was to be the one sanctuary in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> The one God corresponds to the one temple. Just as God cannot be disintegrated into a multitude of manifestations but is one, so too the sacrifices are not to be offered at a multitude of temples and sanctuaries. The entire country is to be subordinated to the holiness of the one God. Thus the confession formula יהוה אחד is also connected via the centralization commandment in Deut 12\* to the subsequent commandment of loyalty to YHWH, the one God of Israel, in Deut 13:2–12\*. The one God to whom undivided loyalty is to be given is the one undivided God who does not break up into a variety of manifestations. There is a close argumentative connection between Deut 6:4–5 and Deut 13:2–12\*. In Deut 6:5, the demand to love YHWH with all one’s heart, all one’s strength of soul, and all one’s might incorporates a central motif of the Neo-Assyrian oaths of loyalty to the great king and treaty literature using the motif of love to denote political loyalty.<sup>4</sup> In Deut 6:5, this motif of loyalty is transferred from the Assyrian great king to YHWH, the one undivided God, to whom undivided love in the sense of loyalty is to be due. Likewise, from the Neo-Assyrian contract terminology comes the motif of love and devotion “with all one’s heart” (*ina gummurti libbi*). What Deut 6:5 succinctly formulates as a confession, the unrestricted loyalty to YHWH, is broadly developed in Deut 13:2–12\*.<sup>5</sup>

After the New Babylonian catastrophe in 587/86 BCE, the Deuteronomistic framing of the pre-exilic “Urdeuteronomium,” through Deut 5–11; 29–30\*, introduces the figure of Moses as the promulgator of Deuteronomy and moves its promulgation from Jerusalem to the land of Moab before the entry into the Promised Land. With this location of the promulgation of Deuteronomy in the land of Moab, a connection is also established with the divine revelation at Mount Horeb, where YHWH revealed the Decalogue to the people in Deut 5. Now the prohibition of foreign gods, which includes the prohibition of images, becomes the hermeneutical key of the interpretation of the nominal phrase יהוה אחד in the Sh<sup>c</sup> ma’ Israel in Deut 6:4. The “(re)presentation formula” (*Vergegenwärtigungsformel*) “I am YHWH your God”<sup>6</sup> in Deut 5:6,<sup>7</sup> modeled on Assyrian royal inscriptions<sup>8</sup> which, like the prohibition of foreign gods that follows in Deut 5:7 – “you shall have no other gods against me (פני על) – presupposes the existence of other gods, but permits YHWH alone to be worshipped and

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Otto, “Jerusalem und Garizim,” 111–145.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Parpola – Watanabe, *Treaties*, 11, 66, n. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 1201–1272.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 1–11*, 716–717.

<sup>7</sup> In older research of the Hebrew Bible this formula was called a “Selbstvorstellungsformel”; cf. Zimmerli, “Jahwe,” 179–209; Diesel, *Monotheismus*, 87–93.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. “I am Assurbanipal, king of the world” (*anaku* <sup>(d)</sup>*aššur-bân-aplu šar kiššati*), cf. Borger, *Assurbanipal*, 77.

is thus to be understood monolatrously. This also applies to the interpretation of the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. According to Deut 6:5 in the Deuteronomistic interpretation of the 6th century, YHWH alone and no other god is to be given love and thus loyalty. Correspondingly, the commandment of loyalty in Deut 13:2–12 is extended deuteronomistically in Deut 13:4 in relation to the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma Israel in Deut 6:5:

Deut 6:5 “You shall love YHWH, your God, with all your heart and with all your strength of your soul and with all your might.”

Deut 13:4 “YHWH your God is testing you to see if you love YHWH, your God, with all your heart and with all your strength of your soul.”

Read in this perspective of the Deuteronomistic framing of the laws of Deuteronomy, the main commandments of Deuteronomy in Deut 12 and Deut 13 become a concretization of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5, mediated by the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. Finally, the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5 is linked to the Deuteronomistic covenant formula in Deut 26:16–17 as the performative pivot of Deuteronomistic Deuteronomy.<sup>9</sup> There the motif “with all your heart and all the strength of your soul” is linked to the fulfillment of God's commandments and laws. If in the 7th century, the Sh<sup>e</sup>ma' Israel is about the mono-Yahwistic unity of God, who is not to be split up into a multitude of manifestations at a multitude of places of worship, to whom loyalty is to be given undivided as to the one, then in the 6th century the entire life of God's people Israel is to find its center in the fulfillment of the commandments and laws of YHWH. Accordingly, all other gods of the mythical pantheon that have projective functions in the fulfillment of human desires, are to be rejected. In this respect, the process of separation of God from the world is mirrored by the history of interpretation of the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma' Israel, whereby it is not the human projection of desire that is to determine the divine pleroma but, instead, it is God who becomes transcendent that is to determine the actions of humans in the world. The freedom of God, fought for through monolatry on its way to monotheistic transcendence, consistently leads to a presence of God in His Torah promulgated by Moses and thus to a consistent binding of man to the will of God as a countermovement to the binding of the divine world to human projections of expectations.

The tendency towards the transcendentalization of God reaches its goal with the enforcement of the monotheistic interpretation of the denial of the existence of other gods in the First Commandment of the Decalogue and in the Sh<sup>e</sup> ma' Israel. In the course of the post-exilic expansion of Deuteronomy, the chapter Deut 4 is inserted into the Deuteronomistic framework of Deuteronomy.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in the Deuteronomistic Deuteronomy, the *monolatric* First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5:6–8a served as a hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the *older* Sh<sup>e</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 12–34*, 1901–1906.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Otto, *Deuteronomium 1–11*, 508–603.



ma' Israel in Deut 6:4–5, now Deut 4:35–40 takes its place and becomes the hermeneutical key for the interpretation of the Decalogue and the Shema' Israel:

(Deut 4:35) You experienced it (sc. the Exodus) so that you might know that YHWH is the God, *besides him there is none*. (Deut 4:36) From heaven he made you hear his thunder to teach you, and on earth he made you see his mighty fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. (Deut 4:37) And because he loved your fathers, he chose every descendant after them, and he himself brought you out of Egypt with great power, (Deut 4:38) to drive out nations greater and stronger than you completely from before you, to bring you into the land and give it to you for an inheritance, as it is today. (Deut 4:39) Know therefore this day, and take it to heart, that the God YHWH is above in heaven, and below in the earth, *no one else*. (Deut 4:40) Keep his commandments and his statutes, to which I commit you this day, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long in the land which YHWH your God is giving you for all your days.

In Deut 4:35, conclusion is drawn from the historical memory of the Exodus in the form of rhetorical questions aiming at the uniqueness of God, apart from whom there exists no other God, thus overcoming the monolatrous interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 in favor of its monotheistic understanding,<sup>11</sup> which is declared as knowledge “you have experienced (ראה) so that you know (ידע).”<sup>12</sup> Deut 4:39 sharpened God's exclusivity to the effect that, for YHWH, there could be no fixing of His heavenly form to any form of earthly representation, with the monotheistic interpretation in Deut 4:35 being applied to the whole of creation. Deut 4:35, 39 serves in the post-exilic literary update in Deuteronomy as a hermeneutical key of monotheistic interpretation for the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5:7–10, in which the emphasis is shifted from the prohibition of foreign gods to the prohibition of images as an expression of God's incommensurability. Beyond the First Commandment, Deut 4:35, 39 also becomes the hermeneutical key to a monotheistic understanding of the Shema' Israel in Deut 6:4–5. In the confessional formula יהוה אלהינו, the relation of subject and predicate is reversed. In the monolatrous interpretation “our God” is the subject and YHWH the predicate; and now YHWH becomes the subject, who is known

<sup>11</sup> On the question of the cultural-historical preconditions for the emergence of monotheism in Israel, cf. the media-materialistic approach of Joachim Schaper (*Media and Monotheism*, 55–210), as well as the critical discussion of this monograph in the *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte/Journal for Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Law* 27 (2021) with contributions by, among others, Jan Assmann (“Medien,” 117–131), Rainer Kessler (“Monetarisierung,” 145–166), Jan Dietrich (“Bedingungen,” 167–174), Dominik Markl (“Theologie,” 175–186), Konrad Schmid (“Lesbarkeit,” 187–202) and the replica by Joachim Schaper (“»Medienmaterialistischer« Ansatz,” 227–242).

<sup>12</sup> That Deut 4:35, 39 is not to be interpreted monolatrically or henotheistically, as Nathan MacDonald (*Monotheism*, 78–96) suggests, is shown by the parallelism of the formulations with Isa 45:20–21; cf. Hartenstein, “Gestalt,” 72.

as the predicate that He is “our God.” Through the monotheistic interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 through Deut 4:35–40, the transcendence – and thus otherness and non-worldliness – of God becomes the key to the interpretation of the entire Torah, which is summarized in the Mosaic interpretation in the post-exilic Deuteronomy: God becomes God and world becomes world,<sup>13</sup> and God is in this world in the form of the Torah interpreted by Moses. Thus the freedom of God, who is not limited by any other gods as human-mythical wishful projections, is theologically formulated in Deut 4:35–40; 5:7–10 and Deut 6:4–5 in its monotheistic interpretation. If, through transcendence, God’s freedom is monotheistically articulated and, through the Torah, man’s relationship to God is pragmatically mediated through the active fulfillment of the Torah, the question that arises is how God’s transcendence could also become the justification for man’s freedom in the Hebrew Bible. *God’s freedom can be seen as a prerequisite and as a context for the discovery of human freedom.* To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the literature of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

## 2. God’s Freedom as a Context for the Discovery of Human Freedom

The sapiential Book of Proverbs has a long literary history stretching from the pre-exilic period of the 8th/7th centuries to the post-exilic period of the 4th/3rd centuries, with Prov 10–27 largely dating back to the pre-exilic and Prov 1–9; 28–31 to the post-exilic period.<sup>14</sup> The early sapiential worldview differs from the primarily priestly worldview of the Torah in its consistently empirical approach which deduces structures of order from empirical observations in nature and the coexistence of people:

“North wind brings rain, hidden tongue fretful faces” (Prov 25:23)

“When the wood goes out, the fire goes out;

when there is no one to stir up, the quarrel calms down” (Prov 26:20)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Otto, “Axial Phenomena.”

<sup>14</sup> For a history of research on the Book of *Proverbs*, cf. Schipper, *Sprüche*, 1–86. On Prov 28 as post-exilic chapter in Proverbs, cf. Schipper, “Proverbs 28,” 27–44. A blanket late dating of Prov 10–27 is contradicted by the principally different approach to empirical experience in the early Proverbs in contrast to an approach to theological speculation as in Prov 8 in the late wisdom; cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 152–174. The reception of the Egyptian teaching of Amen-em-ope in Prov 22:17–24:22 was the starting point of the literary history of the Proverbs, which underlines its pre-exilic dating; cf. Römheld, *Wege*; Schipper, “Amenemope,” 53–72, 232–248; Laisney, *L’enseignement*; Reichmann, *Übernahme*. What is astonishing about the Judean reception of the late Egyptian wisdom teaching of Amen-em-ope is that the Judean translators in the first half of the 1st millennium received this teaching of Amen-em-ope, shaped by “Personal Piety” and the associated dissolution of the classical figure of Egyptian wisdom of the 2nd millennium, conservatively as if through the eyes of the authors of the teaching of Ptahhotep of the first half of the 2nd millennium.

The fact that the structures of order are only partially recognizable for human beings and can only be read from individual phenomena, entails an awareness of the limits of wisdom's recognition, preserved by the genre of proverbs as a genre of gnomic apperception:<sup>15</sup> "Three things are too wonderful for me and four I cannot understand. The way of the eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on the rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea, and the way of a man with a young woman" (Prov 30:18–19).

The knowledge of the epistemological limits of empirical cognition is expressed already in the genre of proverbs. If the knowledge of these limits of gnomic apperception is present in the empiricism of approach in wisdom thought, this is even more true when it comes to the apprehension of God, insofar as for this form of wisdom thought, God can only be comprehended as the limit of cognition from empirical experience. The early wisdom of the first half of the first millennium reaches its goal precisely where it comes to understand God as the limit of its possibilities of cognition:

"There is no wisdom, no insight, no counsel that can stand before YHWH" (Prov 21:30)

"Many plans does the heart of a man take, but the counsel of YHWH – it rises to reality" (Prov 19:21)

"From God are the steps of a man, a man, how can he understand his way of life" (Prov 20:24)

If God can only be expressed as the limit of empirical knowledge, then statements about His essence are just as excluded as the attempt to conceptualize God's will, so that in view of God's impenetrability, man is only referred to an attitude of fear of God: "The fear of YHWH is a source of life, to avoid the snares of death" (Prov 14:27).

The approach of thinking with empirical experience, which can only express God as the limit of knowledge and wisdom, implies knowledge of man's freedom to decide between good and evil in the sense of the reasonable and the unreasonable, to which the wisdom teachers' paraenesis aims. The insight into the limits of one's own wisdom makes an attitude of modesty and humility appear reasonable: "Before the collapse the heart of man is haughty, but before honor there is humility" (Prov 18:12).

In Prov 1–9, the authors of post-exilic wisdom abandoned early wisdom's approach to empirical experience, which God could only bring up in a negative theology as the limit of wisdom, in favor of theological speculation, as in Prov 8 in particular. But this raises the question of where man gained a knowledge of what is good and evil in the eyes of God.<sup>16</sup> While in early wisdom empirical experience in nature and human coexistence became the context of ethos and the source of knowledge about good and evil, this presupposed a trust in the reliability of the order experienced in

<sup>15</sup> Cf. von Rad, *Weisheit*, 41–53.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Otto, "Gut und Böse," 207–231.

nature but also in society, despite the knowledge of one's own limits of knowledge. This trust was shattered with the experience of the Babylonian catastrophe of Jerusalem and Judah in the 6th century, which led to a consistent monotheization of YHWH in prophecy and Torah,<sup>17</sup> as shown in the interpretation of the Decalogue and Shema' Israel, and in wisdom in its consistent theologization, which turns the empirical approach of the older wisdom on its head and makes YHWH the source of its knowledge:

My son, if you accept my words and heed my commandments, so that your ear listens carefully to wisdom, your heart inclines towards insight, if you call for knowledge, if you ask for insight with a loud voice, if you seek it like silver, search for it like for treasures, then you gain insight into the fear of YHWH and knowledge of God you find, for YHWH gives wisdom, from his mouth comes knowledge and insight. He holds out success for the upright, He gives a shield to the righteous. He guards the paths of justice and protects the way of the upright (Prov 2:1–8).

Wisdom is revealed by the monotheistically understood God YHWH,<sup>18</sup> from His mouth shall come knowledge and insight. However, YHWH does not speak directly to the person asking for wisdom, but the wisdom revealed by God is found in the mouth of wisdom teachers and thus, in the wisdom tradition. The fear of God is now no longer the goal and limit of wisdom, as in the older wisdom, but the starting point and content of wisdom, whereby in the quasi-identity-philosophical speculation of post-exilic wisdom, the content and mediation of the revealed wisdom merge into one, as in Prov 8:22–31, and are connected with a promise of happiness for those who follow it:

My son, do not forget my teaching and keep my commandments in your heart. For the length of the days and years of your life and peace they increase for you. Goodness and reliability shall not leave you! Bind them about your neck! Write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and applause in the eyes of God and man. Trust in YHWH with all your heart, do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways recognize him: then he will smooth your paths. Be not wise in your eyes! Fear God and shun evil! (Prov 3:1–7).

Should this promise of happiness not come true, wisdom teachers present the motif of suffering as divine educational and testing actions. The question that arises in view of the suffering of the righteous – whether the wisdom tradition

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Otto, "Monotheismus," 109–116.

<sup>18</sup> JiSeong J. Kwon ("Instructions," 3–26) convincingly shows that in the chapters Prov 3; 6–7, direct reference is made to the *Shema' Israel* in Deuteronomy.

can convey the knowledge of good and evil that goes back to God and whether it holds a solution to the problem of theodicy in store – is critically reflected upon in Job's dialogues with his friends and ultimately brought to a conclusion by recourse to mythical traditions and the theology of creation as well as the reference to the lack of human knowledge in comparison to God's knowledge,<sup>19</sup> but not resolved. The literary supplement of the Elihu speeches offers a solution by recourse to the older wisdom and the synthetic conception of life as the connection between deed and reward, which is presented as a foundation for ethics in order to prevent ethical libertinage. In contrast to this conservative recourse to the tradition of pre-exilic wisdom, the literary addendum to the Book of Job in Job 28 takes a different path, which productively takes up the upheavals of the post-exilic wisdom in comparison to that of the pre-exilic time in the form of a negative theology.<sup>20</sup> The human endeavor to distinguish between good and evil is compared to the image of a miner who digs into the depths of the mine in search of treasures. Even if he finds "treasures," he still does not find the wisdom of God. Here, traits of the epistemological borderline consciousness of wisdom are condensed into a negative theology:

"Wisdom, where is it to be found, where is the place of insight.

No man knows her estimation, she is not found in the land of the living" (Job 28:12–13)

None of the "precious things" that man finds can outweigh the wisdom of God, which is to say that it is incommensurable with all human insight:

"Wisdom, where does she come from, and where is the place of insight?

It is veiled from the eyes of all the living, hidden from the birds of the air...

God knows the way to it, only he knows its place" (Job 28:20–21, 23)

The wisdom of a divine knowledge of good and evil remains inaccessible and hidden from man. It is with God alone and no path of human empirical understanding of the world, especially of nature, which shows how to find some "precious insights," leads to the wisdom of God. If the divine knowledge of good and evil remains inaccessible and hidden from man, no ethics can be founded on it and ethical libertinage can take hold. The literary addition to Job 28 in Job 28:28 wants to prevent this and limit the negative theology in Job 28 in its ethical consequences:

"But to man he (sc. God) said:

Behold the fear of God, that is wisdom; the shunning of evil is understanding."

Through the insertion of the originally literarily independent chapter Job 28 into the Book of Job, the revelational-theological overcoming of negative theology implied in Job 28:28 is caught up, insofar as the speeches of God in Job 38–41 can be read as overcoming also the negative theology in Job 28, insofar as only a revelation of God is able to heal the aporia of negative theology, to give an answer to the question of theodicy and to give ethics a convincing foundation.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Keel, "Entgegnung," 51–159.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of Job 28, cf. Witte, *Leiden*, 162–165.

The authors of Job 28 and of the discourses on God in Job 38–41, as well as the redactors who introduced Job 28 into Job's dialogues with his friends and supplemented it with Job 28:28, take part in an intensive discourse in late Persian and early Hellenistic times about human access to God's wisdom and His knowledge of good and evil. The position of the authors of Job 28 is adopted and differentiated in the Book of Ecclesiastes.<sup>21</sup> Within the framework of the large program section Ecc 1:3–3:22,<sup>22</sup> the book begins with the insight of negative theology into man's inability to know God and thus to understand the world in its entirety: "I consider the toil which God has given to man to labor withal: all things has he made fitting for his hour, even the knowledge of the time afar off he has given to their understanding, without man knowing the work which God has created, from the beginning even unto the end" (Ecc 3:10–11).

The authors of Ecclesiastes go beyond Job 28 in that man certainly has a knowledge of the existence of God's wisdom, which is expressed in the appropriateness of everything created by YHWH, but beyond a "that" of existence, he cannot know anything about divine wisdom and cannot recognize it, as Job 28:24 already states: "For he (sc. God) looks to the ends of the earth, only he sees what is under the universe of heaven."

For Qohelet, there is a divine order in the world that makes everything that happens appropriate – man knows that. And yet he cannot recognize and understand the work of God in its totality. Only such knowledge would reveal to man the wisdom of God in the world. Job 28 and Ecclesiastes together contradict the revelational-theological speculation in the chapters Prov 1–9, and especially in Prov 8, and their overcoming of the negative theology of the early proverbs in Prov 10–27 which brings up God as the limit of wisdom.<sup>23</sup> Prov 8 takes the stand that man is given a knowledge of a pre-existent wisdom and with it a knowledge of the work of God in its totality through the revelation of God. Qohelet, on the other hand, argues dialectically. On the one hand, there is a knowledge that everything is appropriately made by God, on the other, there is the non-understanding of what is appropriate: "I consider the work of God in its entirety: for verily men cannot know the work that is done under the sun, because even when man labors to know it, yet he does not know it. And even if the wise man claims to know it, yet he cannot know it" (Ecc 8:17).

If the wisdom of God remains hidden from man, then for the authors of Ecclesiastes no standards qualifying the actions of man as good or bad can be traced back to YHWH, so that for Qohelet, as a way out of the negative theology of the *deus*

21 On the history of research in Ecclesiastes, cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 5–38.

22 On the literary structures in the Book of Ecclesiastes, cf. Backhaus, *Zeit*, 76–351; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Glück*, 5–6.

23 On the critical encounter of the Book of Ecclesiastes with Prov 1–9, cf. Weeks, "Qohelet," 99–111.

*absconditus* and its fatal consequences for ethics, is a pragmatic-utilitarian justification of a minimal ethics.<sup>24</sup>

The negative theology, which is formulated post-exilically in Job 28 and in the Book of Ecclesiastes, presupposes the assertion of monotheism, which is shown in Deut 4:35–40 as the hermeneutical key of the interpretation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue in Deut 5 and of the *Sh' ma' Israel* in Deut 6, and brings the transcendence and non-worldliness of God into post-exilic wisdom, which already has a connecting point in a negative theology in early wisdom.<sup>25</sup>

In the Book of Ben Sira, a reverse conclusion is drawn from this amalgamation of wisdom and Torah, and the negative theology in the Book of Ecclesiastes<sup>26</sup> is negated in terms of creation theology:<sup>27</sup> “He formed them mouth and tongue, eyes and ears, and gave them a heart to think, and filled them with understanding, and taught them to know good and evil” (Sir 17:6–7).

The continuation in Sir 17:12 shows that Ben Sira's departure from Kohelet's negative theology is creation-theologically based: “An everlasting covenant he (sc. God) has made with them and revealed commandments to them.”

In this discourse in the late post-exilic wisdom, the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3, a post-priestly, wisdom-influenced teaching narrative,<sup>28</sup> intervenes to develop a quite independent position in this discourse on negative theology. If, on the one hand, man's ability to know God and the ability to distinguish what is good and evil in the eyes of God is questioned in a negative theology and, on the other hand, this form of negative theology is negated by a theology of creation and overtaken by the revelation of this knowledge by God in the form of the Torah,<sup>29</sup> the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3 traces the knowledge of good and evil back to the transgression of God's commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Despite this divine command, man eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Gen 2, man had already been given the ability to pragmatically order his lifeworld, which was founded in the creation of man,<sup>30</sup> as the naming of the animals in connection with the sapiential list science shows.<sup>31</sup> However, the moral judgment of what is good and what is evil

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 172–173.

<sup>25</sup> On the post-exilic amalgamation of wisdom and Torah, cf. Otto, “Amalgamierung,” 173–188.

<sup>26</sup> On the literary relations between the books of Ecclesiastes and Ben Sira, cf. Marböck, “Kohelet,” 275–301. On the history and state of research on Ben Sira, cf. Reiterer, “Ben Sira,” 23–60.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Beentjes, “Ben Sira,” 45–73.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Otto, “Lehrerzählung,” 167–192; Schüle, *Prolog*, 150–177; Arneht, *Urgeschichte*, 97–147.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 257–263.

<sup>30</sup> On the sapiential motif of creation of the human being, cf. Doll, *Menschenschöpfung*, 15–39.

<sup>31</sup> In Gen 2:7, 18–24, an older, originally literarily independent human creation narrative has been integrated into the post-exilic paradise-narrative in Gen 2:4–3:24; cf. Otto, *Ethik*, 61–64. It should be noted that a Syriac-Canaanite myth tradition as in *KTU* 1.107 and *KTU* 1.100 was received alongside the narrative in Gen 2:7, 18–24; cf. Korpel – de Moor, *Adam*, 5–88. The biblical paradise-narrative is not about the etiology of the mortality of man as a failed deity as in the Ugaritic incantations, but about an explanation of the

in the divine eyes is to be reserved for God, which the authors of the paradise narrative tie in with the negative theology in Job 28 and in the Book of Ecclesiastes. With the motif of the acquisition of this knowledge through the transgression of a divine prohibition, the narrators of the post-exilic teaching narrative tie in with Job 15:8, that man, listening to the counsel of God, has usurped the wisdom of God. In contrast to the traditional interpretation of the paradise narrative in Gen 2–3 as a narrative of the “fall of man” and punishment, it is a treatise on the freedom of decision granted by God to man to follow the prohibition or to transgress it and the consequences of this transgression. This presupposes that God withdraws in His omnipotence and grants man the freedom of decision. Freedom, however, is only given where and if one can fail in it, and so in the paradise narrative it must be told that man fails. Only failure constitutes, in a fully valid sense, the realization of the freedom of choice granted by God and allows the primeval event to become an interpretation of the *human condition* today.<sup>32</sup> The reductions of the divine intentions of creation formulated in the curses in Gen 3:14–19 are understood as a *pretium libertatis* of the freedom granted by God to man and an answer to the problem of reductions in the divine creation of the world. In the post-exilic Torah, the monotheistic interpretation of the First Commandment in Deut 4 and of the Shema’ Israel in Deut 6 was enforced against their monolatrous-henotheistic interpretation, thus establishing God’s freedom in His transcendence and non-worldliness. In the post-exilic paradise-narrative in Gen 2–3, the withdrawal of the monotheistic God from the world in renouncing His omnipotence in a kind of *Zimzum* becomes the justification of man’s freedom in his knowledge of what is good and evil in the eyes of God. The justification of man’s freedom and his knowledge of good and evil, which has its starting point in the freedom of God and thus in negative theology, can, in turn, become its negation in ethics.

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ambivalences of human life as reductions of the divine intentions of creation, which the priestly scripture in Gen 1:1–2:3 considers as good.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Otto, “Urmensch,” 679–689.



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# The Platonic-Biblical Origins of Apophatic Theology: Philo of Alexandria's Philosophical Interpretation of the Pentateuchal Theophanies

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**Abstract:** This article examines Philo's philosophical interpretation of the three theophanies in Exodus, which would, centuries later, continue to be considered by the great thinkers responsible for developing negative theology, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite. Although Exod 33:11 clearly states that the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as if someone were to speak to his own friend, according to Philo, the lawgiver neither saw the face of God, nor learned the proper name of God, nor was he able to comprehend the essence of God. These very statements became the inspiration for later apophaticism. The present article seeks to establish to what extent Philo's theses were influenced by Plato's philosophy or by later Middle Platonism, and to what extent Philo, by commenting allegorically on the Pentateuch, becomes the initiator of new ideas hitherto unknown in philosophical discourse. In the course of the analyses, three great questions of apophatic theology are discussed: 1. the unnameability of God; 2. the unknowability of God's essence; and 3. the knowability of God's nature by grace.

**Keywords:** apophaticism, negative theology, mysticism, Philo of Alexandria, Moses, Exodus, theophanies, Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Hellenistic Judaism, allegorical exegesis, Old Testament exegesis, patristic exegesis, Hellenistic philosophy, philosophy of God

## 1. From Anthropomorphism to Apophaticism: An Explanation of the Issue under Study

In searching for the origins of apophatic theology, such as was developed with great vigor in the Neoplatonic tradition beginning with Plotinus, and in Christian circles beginning with Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>1</sup> one can go far, far back in the history of ideas.

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I would like to express my gratitude to Scott Mackie (Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA), who not only made linguistic corrections to this essay, but also inspired some new thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> Of course, many themes of apophatic theology were addressed by thinkers working before Plotinus or Gregory of Nyssa; however, with the latter, the issue is much more developed and occupies an important place in their doctrines. In the area of Greco-Roman philosophy, especially in the circles of the Middle Platonists, there arose the question of the ineffability of God, but not the doctrine of the unknowability of God's essence. The latter would only be developed by Plotinus in connection with the adoption of the positively understood concept of the infinity of the One. In the case of Christian theology, the conviction of the infinity and unknowability of God's essence has been around from its very beginnings. Gregory of Nyssa, however, made this theme the leitmotif of many of his exegetical works. On the origins

In fact, already the earliest Greek philosophers, while criticizing anthropomorphic representations of God (gods), pointed out that humans always conceive of God through the prism of their own nature or the culture in which they live. “Mortals think, Xenophanes noted, that the gods are begotten, and have the clothing, voice, and body of mortals.”<sup>2</sup> “Africans say their gods are snub-nosed and black, Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.”<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Heraclitus, while emphasizing the difference between the nature and wisdom of God and that of man, stated: “The wisest of men will appear like an ape compared to a god, in wisdom, in beauty, and in every other respect.”<sup>4</sup> In turn, while hinting at the inadequacy of the names by which people refer to God, he said: “One being, the only wise one, would and would not be called by the name of Zeus.”<sup>5</sup> Similar intuitions can also be found in biblical theology. Although the Old Testament is full of anthropomorphic theophanies of God, there also is the tradition that no man has actually seen God, “because a human being cannot look at God and remain alive” (Exod 33:20). Furthermore, there are statements such as “God is not as a man” (Num 23:19), or “The Lord sees not as man sees” (1 Sam 16:7), as well as “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). Thus, the intuition that God’s nature and wisdom are diametrically opposed to human nature and wisdom was already emerging in the oldest philosophical and religious traditions.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to criticize anthropomorphisms and to emphasize that God differs from the way humans usually conceive of Him, and quite another to put forward the philosophical thesis of God’s unnameability, linked to the concept of his ontological transcendence, or the thesis of the absolute unknowability of God’s essence by the finite human intellect, linked to the concept of positively understood infinity. The latter seems to have first appeared with Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish thinker from the beginning of the first millennium, who not only criticized biblical anthropomorphisms, but, while commenting on the Pentateuch “through Platonic glasses,” came to very momentous conclusions, which would be taken over and developed by the great representatives of apophatic theology such as Gregory of Nyssa,

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of apophatic theology before Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa, see Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 13–84; Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 35–102 and 191–221; Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 120–133 and 207–251; Louth, *The Origins*, 1–34; Ramelli, “The Divine,” 167–188; Edwards, “Christian Apophaticism,” 64–77; Mrugalski, “The Notion of Divine Infinity,” 69–84.

<sup>2</sup> DK, 21 B 14.

<sup>3</sup> DK, 21 B 16. One of Xenophanes’ most famous polemics against anthropomorphisms, especially Homeric ones, reads as follows (DK, 21 B 15): “Now if cattle, horses or lions had hands and were able to draw with their hands and perform works like men, horses like horses and cattle like cattle would draw the forms of gods, and make their bodies just like the body each of them had.”

<sup>4</sup> DK, 22 B 83.

<sup>5</sup> DK, 22 B 32.

Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor and Meister Eckhart. Of course, the attribution of precedence of an idea to a particular thinker always remains a matter of dispute. Therefore, among scholars there are those who see in Philo a precursor, not only of apophatic theology, but also of many other major theological issues,<sup>6</sup> as well as those who consider that Philo is simply one of the continuators of the great current of thinkers associated with Platonic philosophy, which existed in various forms from the time of the Old Academy, through the circles of the Middle Platonists until the emergence of Neoplatonism.<sup>7</sup> It is admittedly true that Plato himself stated that finding God is a difficult task, and it is even more difficult to talk about Him to everyone.<sup>8</sup> It is also true that the Middle Platonists, referring to Plato, spoke of an ineffable God.<sup>9</sup> None of them, however, stated that the essence of God is in all respects incomprehensible and impossible to grasp by any idea, and that God moves away into infinity before the philosopher who seeks Him.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the objective of Platonic philosophy, as the Middle Platonists note, becomes the knowledge of God and the likening of humans to God, although some difficulties arise in the realization of this goal.<sup>11</sup> Yet they should be overcome by the philosopher who advances on the path of intellectual and moral virtues.

The influence of Plato, or Platonism, on Philo's theology is undeniable, but it should not be overstated either. For Philo is an original thinker who, using certain philosophical ideas and language (not only Platonic, but also Pythagorean, Aristotelian and Stoic), seeks to understand and convey to his readers the deepest content of biblical revelation, and at the same time does not remain uncritical of Scripture, as well as the views of the philosophers he is inspired by.<sup>12</sup> Most of his work is, after all, an allegorical commentary on the Pentateuch, within which he arrives at certain theoretical concepts that did not appear in earlier philosophical discourse, and which, as some scholars suggest, will be taken over from him (directly or indirectly) by Plotinus.<sup>13</sup> The latter, in turn, would become the inspiration for subsequent apophatic theology, both that developed among the Greco-Roman Neoplatonists and that created by Christian thinkers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfson, *Philo*, 439–460; Reale – Radice, “La genesi,” LXX–LXXXVII.

<sup>7</sup> See Dillon, “Philo,” 223–232; Dillon, *The Roots of Platonism*, 35–49; Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 82; Moreschini, *Apuleius*, 224–225.

<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *Tim.* 28c.

<sup>9</sup> See Calabi, *Arrhetos Theos*, which is a collection of articles on this issue.

<sup>10</sup> See Philo, *Somm.* 1.67; *Post.* 18. We will return to this topic later in this study.

<sup>11</sup> See Eudorus, *Fr.* 25; Alcinous, *Did.* 153.3–12; 181.19–182.14; Iustinus, *Dial.* 3.4–4.2. See also Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 66–83; Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 293–299; Mrugalski, “The Notion of Divine Infinity,” 73–75.

<sup>12</sup> See Bonazzi, “Towards Transcendence,” 233–251.

<sup>13</sup> See Sterling, “Did Ancient Philosophers Read Philo?,” 37–63; Radice, “Nameless Principle,” 175–178.

<sup>14</sup> Plotinus' influence on later Christian thinkers postulating the infinity and unknowability of God's essence is also debated among modern scholars. In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, for example, some researchers suggest that this thinker arrived at the concept of God's infinity independently of Plotinus, others that he

It is impossible to discuss all aspects of Philo's apophatic theology in such a short text, let alone show its influence on individual thinkers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Therefore, I have selected certain key issues in Philo's apophatic theology, which would be developed in the following centuries, and to concentrate my research around the Old Testament theophanies, especially those described in the Book of Exodus, which become the subject of the Alexandrian's allegorical-philosophical interpretation. I was inspired to make this choice by Denys Turner, who, in his monograph on negative theology, *The Darkness of God*, notes that two stories, each foundational in the intellectual and religious cultures of its respective tradition, play a huge role in understanding the language of the Western Christian mystical tradition: the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, and the story in Exodus of Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai.<sup>15</sup> After which he adds:

There is little doubt that, whether it was the Greek cast of mind picking up the religious significance of Exodus in Platonic terms, or an Hebraic mind which seized upon the philosophical opportunities to be explored in Plato, this convergence did happen and was consciously acknowledged to have happened by theologians both of Greek and Latin traditions. Thus for once, did logic and history coincide. What those theologians thought they were doing explains what they did. They wanted to bring Plato and Exodus together. The effect of their doing so was a seismic shock which was still registering tremors twelve hundred years later – though in our time the earth no longer moves, and what we perceive is the fixed metaphoric topography into which the landscape has settled.<sup>16</sup>

Turner, writing in a general way about the extraordinary encounter between Platonism and Exodus, surprisingly fails to mention Philo, although he is aware that Western apophatic theology, thanks to Latin translations of Greek texts, was directly or indirectly (especially through the works of Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor) influenced by Eastern theology.<sup>17</sup> The latter, in turn, was deeply indebted to the allegorical exegesis of Philo of Alexandria. In this study, therefore, I will try to take a close look at what Turner terms the "seismic shock" that gave impetus to the later apophatic theology that developed over the centuries in East and West. The subject of my study will be an allegorical interpretation of the three theophanies seen by Moses. The first took place at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–14), where God would reveal His name to Moses. The second took place on a mountain,

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was inspired by Plotinus' metaphysics, and still others that he drew from Plotinus selectively and from a certain point in his creative activity. What is indisputable, however, is the influence of Philo of Alexandria on Gregory of Nyssa's exegesis. See Meredith, "The Idea of God," 127–147. See also Geljon, "Divine Infinity," 152–177; Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 243–261.

<sup>15</sup> See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 11–12.

<sup>17</sup> See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 12–13.



where, despite God's presence, Moses actually experienced darkness (Exod 20:21). The third, on the other hand, took place during Moses' prayer, in which the lawgiver asked to see God's face (Exod 33:23).<sup>18</sup> In connection with these three theophanies, I will address three key issues: God's unnameability (a theme that connects Philo to Platonic theology), the unknowability of God's essence (the original theme of Philo's theology), and God's "knowability" by grace (a theme that Christian apophaticism will take up).

## 2. "I am the one who is": On the Unnameability of God

The first theophany of interest occurred at the burning bush. The narrative of Exod 3:1–4:17, where the theophany is described, provides an extensive dialogue between the lawgiver and God regarding the leading of the sons of Israel out of Egypt, in 3:13–15, which in the Septuagint version, reads:

And Moses said to God, "Look, I shall come to the sons of Israel and shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you'; they will ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I am The One Who Is." And he said, "Thus shall you say to the sons of Israel, 'The One Who Is has sent me to you.'" And God said again to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, God of Abraam and God of Isaak and God of Iakob, has sent me to you.' This is an everlasting name of mine and a memorial of generations to generations."<sup>19</sup>

Of particular interest are the LXX translations of two Hebrew phrases: in verse 14: *ehyeh āšer ehyeh* ('I am what I am,' or 'I will be what I will be') was translated as:  $\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \epsilon\iota\mu\ \acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$  ('I am the being,' or 'I am the one who is'),<sup>20</sup> while the phrase

<sup>18</sup> It is these three theophanies, or rather Philo's interpretation of them, that will become the inspiration for Gregory of Nyssa, who in *The Life of Moses* (a work with the same title as one of Philo's works) symbolically describes the mystical journey in getting to know the unknowable God. This process will never end, since God (the object of the search) is infinite. See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Moys.* 2.19–41; 2.162–169; 2.219–255. See also Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Exod 3:13–15 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

<sup>20</sup> An older English translation of the Septuagint, by Lancelot C.L. Brenton, renders the expression  $\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \epsilon\iota\mu\ \acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$  as 'I am THE BEING' (*The Septuagint with Apocrypha*, 73). Such a translation, however, suggests a kind of ontologisation of the name of God. Whereas the Greek philosophers used the term  $\tau\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$  when speaking of being, the Septuagint text employs the active masculine participle of the verb  $\epsilon\iota\mu\acute{\iota}$ , preceded by a masculine article ( $\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$ ). Therefore, the more recent English translation of the Septuagint by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright is more appropriate, since the formula  $\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \epsilon\iota\mu\ \acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$  is translated here as 'I am the one who is' (*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, 53). Nevertheless, it is true that Philo repeatedly identifies God with being and uses the term  $\tau\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\omega}\nu$  on this occasion. See Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton*, 45–88.

in verse 15, containing the Tetragrammaton: *YHWH ʾēlohē*, has been translated as: κύριος ὁ θεός (“The Lord, the God”). This type of Greek translation of the Hebrew text became the basis for the Alexandrian to conclude that God, while speaking to Moses from the burning bush, did not actually reveal His proper name to him, but only the title κύριος ὁ θεός, which indicates His relation to the world. Thus God in His essence is unnameable. The thesis of God’s unnameability appears in many of Philo’s works, and is most extensively discussed in *De mutatione nominum*, where our author states:

It is a logical consequence that no personal name (τὸ μὴδ’ ὄνομα κύριον) even can be properly assigned to the truly Existent (τῷ ὄντι πρὸς ἀλήθειαν). Note that when the prophet desires to know what he must answer to those who ask about His name He says “I am He that is” (Exod 3:14), which is equivalent to “My nature is to be, not to be spoken (τῷ εἶναι πέφυκα, οὐ λέγεσθαι).” Yet that the human race should not totally lack a title to give to the supreme goodness He allows them to use by licence of language, as though it were His proper name, the title of Lord God (κύριος ὁ θεός) of the three natural orders, teaching, perfection, practice, which are symbolized in the records as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For this He says is “My age-long name,” belonging as it were to the age of human existence, not to that when age as yet was not, “a memorial” too, not set, that is, beyond memory or apprehension, and again “to generations” (Exod 3:15), not to beings that were never generated (“γενεαῖς,” οὐ φύσεσιν ἀγενήτοις). For those who are born into mortality (τοῖς εἰς τὴν θνητὴν γένεσιν ἐλθοῦσιν) must needs have some substitute for the divine name, so that they may approach if not the fact at least the name of supreme excellence and be brought into relation with it.<sup>21</sup>

The philosophical background of this text is the Platonic distinction between two levels of reality, that is to say, the distinction between intelligible being (νοητός), which is eternal and immutable, and sensible being (αἰσθητός), which is generated and mutable. The former always is, while the latter is becoming.<sup>22</sup> For Philo, the intelligible, eternal and immutable being is God, termed in *Mut.* 11 as the true being (τὸ ὄν πρὸς ἀλήθειαν) and as the one whose nature is to be (τῷ εἶναι πέφυκα). Yet eternal being, according to Philo, is also the Divine Logos and the Divine Powers and, in general, everything that is of an intelligible nature, which the Alexandrian discusses

<sup>21</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 11–13.

<sup>22</sup> See Plato, *Tim.* 27d–28a: “Our starting-point lies, I think, in the following distinction: what is it that always is, but never comes to be (τί τὸ ὄν αἰεὶ, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον), and what is it that comes to be but never is (τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν αἰεὶ, ὄν δὲ οὐδέποτε)? The former, since it is always consistent, can be grasped by the intellect with the support of a reasoned account, while the latter is the object of belief, supported by unreasoning sensation, since it is generated and passes away, but never really is (γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν).” See also Plato, *Phaed.* 79a; 80b–c; 83b.

in virtually all his works.<sup>23</sup> Probably this is why the last part of *Mut.* 12 refers to “natures uncreated” in the plural (φύσεις ἀγένητοι).<sup>24</sup> In the proper sense of the word, however, the uncreated (ἀγένητος) is God alone, since everything else (the Logos, the Powers, and the Ideas, which are the thoughts of God) originates from God and is ontologically dependent on Him. On the other hand, all visible, that is, sensible and corporeal beings, including humanity, are part of the genus of being that is in the process of coming into being. They are destructible and mortal (εις τὴν θνητὴν γένεσιν ἐλθοῦσιν). This Platonic division of reality into real being and being in the process of coming into being is further evident in *Mos.* 1.75–76, in which Philo also comments on the theophany in the burning bush:

God replied to Moses: “First tell them that I am He Who is, that they may learn the difference between what is and what is not (διαφορὰν ὄντος τε καὶ μὴ ὄντος), and also the further lesson that no name at all can properly be used of Me, to Whom alone existence belongs (οὐδὲν ὄνομα τὸ παράπαν ἐπ’ ἐμοῦ κυριολογεῖται, ὃ μόνῳ πρόσεστι τὸ εἶναι). And, if, in their natural weakness, they seek some title to use, tell them not only that I am God, but also the God of the three men whose names express their virtue, each of them the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained – Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice.”<sup>25</sup>

In this text, God is again identified as a being whose essence is existence, while everything else beyond Him, is characterised in a Platonic manner as non-being.<sup>26</sup> The question arises, however, as to why, in the two texts quoted above, the Alexandrian places such emphasis on the impossibility of attributing a name to God.

<sup>23</sup> See Philo, *Opif.* 12–24; *Leg.* 1.51; *Conf.* 171–172; *Deus* 31–32. See also Runia, “The Beginnings of the End,” 289–299; Mrugalski, *Il Dio trascendente*, 89–117.

<sup>24</sup> According to Philo, the generation of the Logos took place beyond time (see *Leg.* 1.19–20). Furthermore, the Alexandrian states explicitly that what is intelligible in nature is eternal (see *Opif.* 12; *Mut.* 267). However, since the Logos, though eternal, originates from God, Philo states in one of his works that “the Logos is neither uncreated as God nor generated as man (οὔτε ἀγένητος ὡς ὁ θεὸς ὢν οὔτε γενητὸς ὡς ἡμεῖς)” (see *Her.* 206). In the quoted text, Philo speaks of uncreated natures (φύσεις ἀγένητοι), using the plural. Perhaps he means here, besides God, also the Logos and his Powers. The term ἀγένητος thus appears here as a synonym for the word ‘eternal.’ After all, intelligible beings, whose life is eternity, have a different ontological status from sensible beings. Also their manner of being generated is not the same as the manner of being generated inherent to beings that are in the process of becoming.

<sup>25</sup> Philo, *Mos.* 1.75–76.

<sup>26</sup> For a similar distinction, see also Philo, *Det.* 160: “For, among the virtues, that of God really is, actually existing, inasmuch as God alone has veritable being. This is why Moses will say of Him as best he may in human speech, ‘I am He that is’ (Exod 3:14), implying that others lesser than He have not being, as being indeed is (ὡς τῶν μετ’ αὐτὸν οὐκ ὄντων κατὰ τὸ εἶναι), but exist in semblance only, and are conventionally said to exist (δόξη δὲ μόνον ὑφεστάναι νομιζομένων).” Plato’s distinction between being and non-being is applied by Philo to emphasise the ontological difference between God and creation. In fact, however, God, according to Philo, transcends even the concept of being and is therefore unknowable. See Mrugalski, “Between Ontologisation and Apophaticism,” 3–5. This topic will be further discussed in the second part of this study.

Are we dealing here with a distancing of Philo from Platonism? After all, according to Plato, knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) concerns precisely the true and immutable being, which is the intelligible being, whereas opinion (δόξα) concerns that which is in the process of coming into being. Gaining knowledge of true being and communicating it to others is, after all, the task of the philosopher, as Plato propounds in much of his *Republic*.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Plato himself also mentions the difficulties that the philosopher encounters in the process of coming to know the supreme being and then conveying this knowledge. Thus, while explaining the famous 'Allegory of the Cave' in Book VII of the *Republic*, he speaks of the disturbance of sight experienced by a man freed from his shackles, and of the initial difficulty in looking at the sun, which symbolises the Idea of the Good.<sup>28</sup> Whereas in *Timaeus* he states that "it would be a hard task to discover the maker and father of this universe of ours, and even if we did find him, it would be impossible to speak of him to everyone" (εἰς πάντα ἀδύνατον λέγειν).<sup>29</sup> However, the initial difficulties in knowing the Idea of the Good and the difficulties in telling everyone about God, the creator and father, are not the same as the absolute unknowability and unnameability of God. Plato's statements thus indicate that only a few are able to comprehend what God is and to only a few can this knowledge be communicated. Moreover, the supreme Idea of the Good, is explicitly stated to be knowable,<sup>30</sup> and its exact cognition is the task of the philosopher.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary scholars point out, however, that the Middle Platonists, that is, the commentators on Plato from the first centuries AD,<sup>32</sup> believed that the first God, whom they identified with the Platonic Idea of the Good or the One, was unnameable and unspeakable.<sup>33</sup> In their allegorical interpretations of Plato's Dialogues, they were referring precisely to the famous statement in *Tim.* 28c, but also to the statement in Plato's *Seventh Letter*, where the philosopher confesses that what pertains to the first and loftiest aspects of nature cannot be expressed either in words or conveyed in writing.<sup>34</sup> Yet the Middle Platonists such as Alcinous, Apuleius and Numenius, who

27 See Plato, *Resp.* 476d–478d; 519b–534e.

28 See Plato, *Resp.* 515e–516c.

29 Plato, *Tim.* 28c.

30 See Plato, *Resp.* 508e: αἰτίαν δὲ ἐπιστήμης οὐσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, ὡς γιγνωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ.

31 See Plato, *Resp.* 517b–c; 518c–d; 532a–b; Plato, *Symp.* 511c. See also Wolfson, *Philo*, 111–112.

32 It will be noted that Philo of Alexandria himself is now also considered a Middle Platonist. See Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 129–183. See also Dillon, "Philo," 223–232.

33 See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 111; Dillon, "Commentary," 101; Moerschini, *Apuleius*, 224–225.

34 See Plato, *Ep.* 7, 341c–d: "There is certainly no treatise of mine on it, nor will there ever be. For unlike other sciences, this one can in no way be communicated by means of words (ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα). On the contrary, it is only through a prolonged communion with the subject, by living with it, that, like a light that is kindled by a flickering flame, it begins to suddenly nourish itself within one's soul." It is quite likely that the statement by Plato quoted here was, albeit freely, reproduced in Apuleius, *De deo Socr.* 124. See Donini, "Apuleio," 95.

spoke explicitly of an ineffable God,<sup>35</sup> lived and worked in the second century AD, long after Philo, who composed his works at the turn of the millennium. Therefore, Harry A. Wolfson's thesis that Philo is the first thinker known to us who developed the doctrine of the absolute unknowability and ineffability of God seems correct.<sup>36</sup>

But did Philo's apophatic theology take inspiration from Plato's statements in *Tim.* 28c<sup>37</sup> or the *Seventh Letter*, as did the later Middle Platonists? We have no convincing evidence for this. It is evident that the Alexandrian knew, quoted and sometimes paraphrased Plato's *Timaeus*, but the texts in which he states that God is absolutely ineffable and unnameable do not refer to the famous statement in *Tim.* 28c or to the *Seventh Letter*. It has been argued by some scholars, however, that Philo, when he states that God cannot be attributed with any name, was inspired by considerations from the *First Hypothesis* of the *Parmenides*.<sup>38</sup> In this hypothesis, Plato states that the One has no parts, has no form, is not in any place, is neither in motion nor at rest, is not in time, and consequently it cannot be said that the One participates in being, nor that the One becomes. Since the One is beyond any categories that are ascribed to that which is, the One cannot also have the name that is ascribed to being.<sup>39</sup> Philo's God assumes the characteristics of the Platonic One.<sup>40</sup> Being absolutely sim-

<sup>35</sup> See Alcinous, *Did.* 165.5: ἄρρητος δ' ἐστὶ καὶ ὡς μόνῳ ληπτός. See also Apuleius, *De deo Socr.* 124–125; Apuleius, *Dogm. Plat.* 1.190–191; Numenius, *Fr.* 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Wolfson, *Philo*, 110–115. Some scholars criticise Wolfson's view, which attributes to Philo an overwhelming influence on later pagan, Christian and even Islamic philosophy. However, when it comes to the doctrine of the ineffability of God, these scholars are unable to point to specific texts written in the time before Philo to refute the claim of his originality on this matter. They quote on this occasion the above mentioned passages from the works of the Middle Platonists (who lived after Philo) or one passage by Cicero (who lived before Philo), who in his work *De natura deorum* paraphrases a statement from *Tim.* 28c (see Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 111). Although Cicero mentions the impossibility of naming God (see Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.30: *Iam de Platonis inconstantia longum est dicere, qui in Timaeo patrem huius mundi nominari neget posse*), this is only a mention and not a doctrine. Furthermore, later in Cicero's work we read that "it is obvious that these propositions are both inherently false and mutually destructive (*per se sunt falsa perspicue et inter se vehementer repugnantia*).” Thus, the view of the impossibility of naming God is criticised in the same work. See also Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 310, who, with regard to the passage quoted above, states: "To my mind the passage must be considered suspect. The Epicurean spokesman is trying to convict Plato of contradictory statements. It is more likely that he is giving tendentious interpretations of two Platonic texts than that he is recording views held by contemporary Platonists."

<sup>37</sup> David Runia found 41 places in Philo's works where God is referred to as ποιητής καὶ πατήρ, which would suggest a reference to the first part of the passage from *Tim.* 28c. None of these places, however, addresses the issue of God's ineffability, which is mentioned in the second part of the statement of *Tim.* 28c. See Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 108–113.

<sup>38</sup> See Plato, *Parm.* 137c–142a. See also Runia, "Naming and Knowing," 77; Calabi, "Unknowability of God," 43–44.

<sup>39</sup> See Plato, *Parm.* 142a.

<sup>40</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40: "For this which is better than the good, more venerable than the monad, purer than the unit (ὁ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ κρείττον καὶ μονάδος πρεσβύτερον καὶ ἐνός εἰλικρινέστερον), cannot be discerned by anyone else; to God alone is it permitted to apprehend God. Now the fact that He is, which can be apprehended under the name of His subsistence, is not apprehended by all or at any rate not in the best way."

ple and transcendent, He does not fall under any physical or metaphysical category. However, not all people, Philo notes, are able to think of God in this way:

Among men some are soul lovers, some body lovers. The comrades of the soul, who can hold converse with intelligible incorporeal natures, do not compare the Existent to any form of created things. They have dissociated Him from every category or quality, for it is one of the facts which go to make His blessedness and supreme felicity that His being is apprehended as simple being, without other definite characteristic; and thus they do not picture it with form, but admit to their minds the conception of existence only.<sup>41</sup>

The numerous allusions to Plato's dialogues that we find in Philo's texts, however, do not fully explain the reason why he regarded God as absolutely unnameable. For, on the one hand, Plato did not develop the doctrine of the unnameability of God; on the other hand, Philo is able to criticise the views of the great philosophers that contradict biblical theology.<sup>42</sup> Thus, if he were convinced that the ontological and epistemological transcendence of God contradicts biblical revelation, he would be able to defend his thesis. Meanwhile, it is the text of Scripture itself that becomes the inspiration for his thesis of the unnameability of God. And while there are many anthropomorphic statements about God in the Bible, there are also some that clearly indicate Divine transcendence. It is this tension, and sometimes contradictory claims, present in the Bible that attracts Philo's attention and becomes the subject of his allegorical exegesis. Within this exegesis, Philo arrives at original theoretical concepts that would later be taken up by the Middle Platonists and then by Plotinus.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Philo, *Deus* 55. See also Philo, *Somn.* 1.231: "Testimony to this is afforded also by the divine response made to Moses' question whether He has a name, even 'I am He that is' (Exod 3:14). It was given in order that, since there are not in God things which man can comprehend (ἵν' ὄν δυνατὸν ἀνθρώπῳ καταλαβεῖν μὴ ὄντων περὶ θεόν), man may recognize His subsistence (ἐπιγνῶ τὴν ὑπαρξίν)."

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Philo, *Opif.* 7–8, where Philo criticises the view of Aristotle, who, while rejecting the doctrine of the creation of the world, attributed inactivity to God. See also Bonazzi, "Towards Transcendence," 233–251, who portrays Philo as an independent-minded philosopher. On the one hand, he used the language and solutions of Platonism of the time, while on the other hand he did so for his exegetical purposes. And since the latter were a priority for him, he was able to appropriately select, and sometimes criticize, concepts developed in the various philosophical schools of his time.

<sup>43</sup> As Roberto Radice rightly points out, Philo on the issue of the unnameability of God appears to be original. For in his doctrine, "Unnameableness is no longer a symptom of the indefiniteness and irrationality of the object. Rather, it is a sign of its infinity and, in consequence, of the subject's inability to grasp its reality: God's essence is indeed necessarily unknowable. We have thus arrived at a view none too distant from Plotinus,' especially given that Philo too recognises a kind of negative theology in which the *via negationis* and the *via eminentiae* coincide. In this respect, then, Philo is an important forerunner of Plotinus. That he may have been Plotinus' first forerunner as regards the ineffability and unnameableness of the Principle is, in my view, a hypothesis that should not be discounted, even though it calls for wide-ranging research if it is to be supported." See Radice, "Nameless Principle," 175. For a slightly different view on this issue see Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 286–289 and 310–312. We will return to

It is important to recognize that *Deus* 55 is preceded by reflection on the question of biblical anthropomorphisms. In particular, Philo contrasts Num 23:19, “God is not as a man,” with Deut 8:5, “like a man He shall train his son.”<sup>44</sup> The latter becomes the basis for Philo’s thesis that biblical anthropomorphisms have a pedagogical function. Representing God in terms that simple people (‘body lovers’) can understand helps them to obey the law, even if they do so only out of fear. People who are educated and familiar with philosophical thinking (‘soul lovers’) do not need anthropomorphic representations of God because they obey His law out of love, not fear. They also, while acknowledging God’s transcendence, do not ascribe any physical or metaphysical categories to God. In this way, the latter are closer to the truth, while the former are on the way to the truth. Therefore, according to Philo, the statement, ‘God is not as a man,’ expresses the truth about the nature of God, while the others (those comparing Him to man) have only a pedagogical function.<sup>45</sup>

If, in turn, one examines the argumentation presented in the work *De mutatione nominum*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which contains an interpretation of the theophany at the burning bush, it becomes clear that the Alexandrian refers precisely to biblical (and not philosophical) texts to support his thesis of God’s unnameability. Indeed, he goes on to cite the biblical stories of God’s revelation to Abraham (Gen 17:1) and Jacob’s mysterious struggle with God (Gen 32:30) to prove that none of the patriarchs ever learned the proper name of God.<sup>46</sup> For the theophany itself is a vision which, as Philo argues elsewhere, took place only in the intellect of the patriarch.<sup>47</sup> A supernatural vision, however, does not imply the acquisition of knowledge of what God is in His essence or of what His proper name is, as we see in *Mut.* 13–15, where Philo appeals to Exod 6:3:

“I was seen,” He says, “of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, being their God, and My name of ‘Lord’ I did not reveal to them” (Exod 6:3). For when the transposition is reset in the proper order it will run thus, “My proper name I did not reveal to thee,” (τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριος οὐκ ἐδήλωσα αὐτοῖς), but, He implies, only the substitute, and that for reasons already mentioned. So impossible to name indeed is the Existent that not even the Potencies who serve Him tell us a proper name. [...] Think it not then a hard saying that the Highest of all things should be unnameable (ἄρητον) when His Word has no name of its own which

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the question of God’s infinity in the next paragraph, when discussing Philo’s conception of God’s absolute unknowability, although, as we shall see, the two issues are linked.

<sup>44</sup> See Philo, *Deus* 53–54.

<sup>45</sup> See Philo, *Deus* 60–69.

<sup>46</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 13–19. See also Philo, *Somm.* 1.231–234.

<sup>47</sup> See Philo, *Sacr.* 59, where, commenting on the theophany under the oaks tree of Mamre, Philo speaks of three images that God produced in Abraham’s soul (τριττὰς φαντασίας ἐνεργάζετο τῇ ὀρατικῇ ψυχῇ). See also Philo, *Mut.* 7. On ‘seeing God’ and the different meanings of this statement in Philo, see Mackie, “Means, Methods, and Mysticism,” 147–179. On this, see also Mackie’s essay in this volume, “Apophatic and Anthropomorphic Visions of God,” 529–546.

we can speak. And indeed if He is unnameable (ἄρρητον) He is also inconceivable and incomprehensible (ἀπερινόητον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον).<sup>48</sup>

In order to understand this text, it is important to note that the Greek term κύριος can be used as a noun (ὁ κύριος, ου) and then means ‘lord,’ but can also be used as an adjective (κύριος, ου, α, ον) and then means ‘proper,’ ‘personal,’ ‘legitimate.’<sup>49</sup> According to Philo, the expression in Exod 6:3, τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριον, appears to be a hyperbaton, that is, a figure of speech in which the typical, natural word order is altered. In fact, the grammatically correct order of the phrase should be: ὄνομά μου τὸ κύριον (‘my proper name’). It follows that he read the term κύριος as an adjective (‘proper,’ ‘personal’). Thus, one and the other of the versions of the biblical statement quoted by him mean the same thing, i.e. “my proper name.” The former, however, is, according to Philo, just an incorrect arrangement of the sentence made by the biblical author. Colson’s English translation, which I have quoted above, therefore appears to be incorrect, since it renders the term κύριον, as ‘Lord.’ However, this translation corresponds to the text that actually appears in the Septuagint (τὸ ὄνομά μου κύριος οὐκ ἐδήλωσα αὐτοῖς), which Philo, for some reason, quotes incorrectly, changing the term κύριος into κύριον.<sup>50</sup> Thus the term κύριον, appears to him as an adjective of the neuter form, which corresponds to the noun τὸ ὄνομα, which is also of the neuter form. This fact provides some food for thought because, as mentioned above, the term κύριος, which appears frequently in the Septuagint, is equivalent to the Tetragrammaton YHWH. It therefore follows that Alexandrian either deliberately altered the biblical verse for the purposes of his philosophical exegesis (which is highly unlikely), or is completely unaware that in the Hebrew version of the text he quotes, the word YHWH appears.<sup>51</sup> This in turn raises the question, which many scholars have already posed, to what extent Philo knew Hebrew, or whether he used the original Hebrew of the Pentateuch at all. Whatever the answer to this question might be, the fact remains that he considers the Greek translation of the Bible to be inspired, as he contends in *Mos.* 2.37–39. If, therefore, the Tetragrammaton YHWH was translated by inspired scribes as κύριος, this was done under divine inspiration. This is why an insightful commentator on the Septuagint such as Philo states that no mortal has ever learned God’s proper name and cannot learn it, for God does not possess one. He is utterly unnameable (ἄρρητος), as he states explicitly

<sup>48</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 13–15.

<sup>49</sup> See LSJ, “κύριος,” 1013.

<sup>50</sup> At this point, however, it should be noted that in the quotation of Exod 6:3 in the manuscripts of *De mutatione nominum*, the word κύριον (or κύριος) does not appear. Yet it does appear in the florilegia, and it is most likely that Philo must have had this version of the text (i.e. with the term κύριον) at his disposal, hence his further argumentation regarding the correct word order of the biblical verse. See Colson – Whitaker, “Appendix to *De Mutatione Nominum*,” 586.

<sup>51</sup> This latter thesis is suggested by Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 78.



in *Mut.* 13–15.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the term κύριος, when it appears in the Septuagint as a noun (‘Lord’), indicates, according to the Alexandrian, only God’s function in relation to the world, and not God’s proper name. This function is to rule over the world. Moreover, the title κύριος, as we learn from Philo’s other works, is actually the name of one of God’s main Powers through which He rules the world. The second is the Power through which God created the world. To the latter Philo ascribes the title θεός, since, according to the etymology he gives, everything was laid or made (ἔθηκε) through it.<sup>53</sup> The issue of the Divine Powers through which God acts in the world and reveals Himself to humanity, however, is already linked to another topic that we will address in the next section, namely the absolute unknowability of God’s essence.

### 3. “In the darkness was God”: On the Unknowability of the Essence of God

The problem of the unnameability of God, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, was taken up by the Middle Platonists of the second century AD, and then by the Neoplatonic philosophers from the third century AD onwards. They were inspired to deal with this issue by Plato’s statements in *Tim.* 28c and the *Seventh Letter*,

<sup>52</sup> See Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 77–82. A slightly different view is taken by Francesca Calabi, who believes that, according to Philo, God has a proper name, but it is hidden to humans, in accordance with the above-quoted passage of *Mut.* 11–13. See Calabi, “Unknowability of God,” 47–48: “It is not a question of the ontological lack of a name, but rather the impossibility of man’s knowing an adequate name. If we cannot know the essence of God, we cannot know His name either. Underlying this idea is the Jewish tradition of the value of a word in terms of its efficacy, the power of a name, its controlling function and the knowledge it provides about whatever is named. According to this tradition God has a name, a hidden name which cannot be pronounced or used, except by particular people in particular circumstances. Given the relationship pertaining between name and reality, the proper name would indicate the essence of God – which humans cannot know. It is for this reason that God did not reveal it. In this perspective, it seems that unnameability is related not to God’s lack of a name, but to His silence in this respect. In the other interpretation, which derived from theorizations based on Plato’s *Parmenides*, ‘He who is’ cannot have a name as it is His nature solely to be: any name given would add something to being, multiply it, destroy its oneness. A name involves predication, which implies plurality and relatedness.”

<sup>53</sup> Philo derives the etymology of the word θεός from the verb τίθημι (‘put,’ ‘set,’ ‘establish’). See Philo, *Conf.* 137: “That Potency of His by which He made (ἔθηκε) and ordered all things, while it is called God (θεός) in accordance with the derivation of that name, holds the whole in its embrace and has interfused itself through the parts of the universe.” Meanwhile, the names of the two supreme powers, θεός and κύριος are mentioned in *Abr.* 121: “The central place is held by the Father of the Universe, Who in the sacred scriptures is called He that is as His proper name, while on either side of Him are the senior Potencies (δυνάμεις), the nearest to Him, the creative (ποιητική) and the kingly (βασιλική). The title of the former is God (θεός), since it made (ἔθηκε) and ordered the All; the title of the latter is Lord (κύριος), since it is the fundamental right of the maker to rule and control what he has brought into being.” See also Philo, *Mut.* 27–29. In *Fug.* 95 Philo enumerates the names of not just two, but five major Powers of God. On the various hierarchies of the Powers, see Termini, *Le potenze di Dio*, 116–136.

in which the philosopher speaks of the difficulty of communicating, whether orally or in writing, the knowledge of the highest principles. A completely new question, however, is the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God, which we find in Philo's writings. It will be taken up after him by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and, in Greco-Roman philosophy, though not until Plotinus. The Middle Platonists do not seem to have addressed this issue.<sup>54</sup> Philo himself touches on this problem while discussing the Sinai theophany, and of greatest interest to him is the final part of the narrative:

And all the people were perceiving the sound and the flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking. Now all the people were afraid and stood at a distance. And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and do not let God speak to us, lest we die." And Moses says to them, "Take courage! For in order to test you God has come to you in order that his fear might be in you so that you do not sin." Now the people were standing at a distance, but Moses went into the darkness where God was (Μωυσῆς δὲ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν γνόφον οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός).<sup>55</sup>

This text emphasises the transcendence of God, both through the description of the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied the theophany, and through the people's fear that an encounter with God causes death. This fear, though repeatedly espoused in scripture, is unfounded (cf. Gen 16:13; 32:30; Exod 33:18–23; Judg 6:22–23; 13:21–23; Isa 6:5). Not one biblical character dies due to the *visio Dei*. Nevertheless, only those whom God has chosen and granted the special grace of seeing are entitled to speak to God. Moses himself, however, although chosen by God, did not see

<sup>54</sup> See Mrugalski, "The Notion of Divine Infinity," 73–75. See also the volume edited by Francesca Calabi, *Arrhetos Theos*. This volume is a collection of contributions from a conference held at the University of Pavia in 2001. This conference initially was entitled *The Unknowability of the First Principle in Middle Platonism*. Yet, because none of the contributors were able to prove the thesis of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God in Middle Platonism (with the exception of the paper on Philo, by Calabi, "Conoscibilità," 35–54), the name of the volume was changed to *The Ineffability of the First Principle in Middle Platonism*.

As we mentioned in the previous paragraph, Roberto Radice recognises Philo's originality on the question of the absolute unnameability and unknowability of the essence of God, which in the thought of the Alexandrian is linked to the concept of infinity (see Radice, "Nameless Principle," 175–178). According to Radice, after Philo and before Plotinus, only Numenius of Apamea considered the question of the unknowability of the Supreme God. The issue, in my opinion, is not so obvious. In fact, in *Fr.* 17, Numenius states that "only the Creator was acknowledged by men, but the First Intellect, which is called being-itself (αὐτοῦν), was completely unrecognised by them (παντάπασις ἀγνωσούμενον παρ' αὐτοῖς)." The fact that many people are unaware of the existence of supreme principles, or ignore them completely, does not mean that the essence of the Supreme Intellect is unknowable to the philosopher seeking it. One cannot conclude from this single passage that Numenius taught the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of God. It is true, however, that Numenius was in some way familiar with Judaic theology and perhaps even with the writings of Philo himself.

<sup>55</sup> Exod 20:18–21 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

God's face.<sup>56</sup> He entered the darkness (εις τὸν γνόφον) in which God was (οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός). The characterisation of God's dwelling place as darkness contradicts many statements in Scripture in which God is called light or the source of light.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, according to Exod 19:18, Mount Sinai was covered with fire while Moses was entering the darkness. Contradictions of this kind attract the attention of Philo, who, interpreting the biblical text allegorically, again in the Platonic spirit, makes a distinction between light perceptible by the senses (belonging to the level of sensible being) and light illuminating the mind (belonging to the level of intelligible being):

And so when you hear that God was seen by man, you must think that this takes place without the light which the senses know, for what belongs to mind can be apprehended only by the mental powers. And God is the fountain of the purest radiance (πηγή δὲ τῆς καθαρωτάτης αὐγῆς θεός), and so when He reveals Himself to a soul the rays He puts forth are free from all shadow and of intense brightness. Do not however suppose that the Existent which truly exists is apprehended (καταλαμβάνεσθαι) by any man; for we have in us no organ by which we can envisage it, neither in sense, for it is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind (οὐτ' αἰσθησιν αἰσθητὸν γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν οὔτε νοῦν). So Moses the explorer of nature which lies beyond our vision, Moses who, as the divine oracles tell us, entered into the darkness (Exod 20:21), by which figure they indicate existence invisible and incorporeal, searched everywhere and into everything in his desire to see clearly and plainly Him, the object of our much yearning, Who alone is good.<sup>58</sup>

Philo's interpretation, however, does not stop at the distinction between two kinds of light: sensible and intelligible. On the one hand, it is true that the darkness referred to in Scripture concerns the level of the senses. Moreover, God, being incorporeal and therefore imperceptible by the senses, is in a sense darkness for the one who tries to know Him by this means. On the other hand, Moses, in Philo's interpretation, did not seek God through the senses, and yet he entered the darkness where God was. What, then, is this darkness in which the lawgiver ended up, if God is "the fountain of the purest radiance" that illuminates the soul? An answer to this question is given in *Post.* 14, which also interprets the theophany of Exod 20. Philo notes that, when Moses entered the darkness, he entered "into unapproachable and invisible conceptions regarding the Existent Being (εις τὰς ἀδύτους καὶ ἀειδεῖς περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἐννοίας). For the Cause of all, Philo adds, is not in the thick darkness, nor locally in any place at all, but high above both place and time (ὑπεράνω καὶ τόπου καὶ χρόνου)." Thus, conceptions, or even the very act of thinking (ἐννοια)

<sup>56</sup> From the earlier narrative describing the theophany, we learn that Moses heard the voice of God speaking (see Exod 19:19), but there is no mention of seeing God's face.

<sup>57</sup> God is metaphorically compared to a lamp, fire and light that illuminates the darkness in Deut 4:24; 2 Sam 22:29; Ps 26:1 (LXX); Ps 35:10 (LXX); Ps 75:5 (LXX); Ps 103:2 (LXX); Isa 2:5; Isa 60:1; Isa 60:20.

<sup>58</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 6–7.

about the transcendent God is darkness to the human intellect. For in fact no concept can adequately capture God as an “object” of thought.<sup>59</sup> This is because the created mind operates with concepts that refer to a spatio-temporal reality, whereas God does not belong to this reality: He is beyond place and time. We could say that here Philo anticipates the concept of ‘diastema,’ which Gregory of Nyssa would later develop. According to the latter, there is a never-reducible abyss between creation and God, which he describes using the term of διάστημα (literally: ‘interval,’ ‘difference’ but also ‘extension’ and ‘dimension’).<sup>60</sup> Created beings always remain and think in spatio-temporal categories (creation is διαστηματικός), whereas God always transcends all spatio-temporal categories (God is ἀδιάστατος).<sup>61</sup> Even after death, without the presence of the body, the human soul will apprehend God in a ‘diastematic’ way (this is the nature of finite creatures), whereas God will always elude such cognition. This does not mean that man will not have knowledge of God, on the contrary he will continually keep growing in knowledge of Him, exceeding and extending his own cognitive capacities by the grace of God, but he will never comprehend the essence of God in its totality, because of its infinity.<sup>62</sup> According to Philo, who in many respects inspired Gregory of Nyssa, the essence, power, and wisdom of God are also infinite, and their intellectual exploration will never end.<sup>63</sup> The complete knowledge of the infinite riches (ἀπερίγραφος πλοῦτος) of God surpasses the cognitive capacity of the finite human mind. The reason for this is not the object of cognition itself, for that object is by its nature knowable (or intelligible = νοητός), but the excess of what is in Him to be known.<sup>64</sup> This excess is symbolised by the metaphor of light:

We cannot look even upon the sun’s flame untempered, or unmixed, for our sight will be quenched and blasted by the bright flashing of its rays, ere it reach and apprehend them, though the sun is but one of God’s works in the past, a portion of heaven, a condensed mass of ether. And can you think it possible that your understanding should be able to

<sup>59</sup> It is noteworthy that Philo, when speaking of these concepts concerning God, uses the term ἀειδής, which literally could be translated as ‘formless’ or ‘indistinct.’ The term also appears in Plato to denote Ideas (see Plato, *Phaed.* 79a) and rather indicates invisibility or incorporeality. Ideas, though incorporeal and invisible are nevertheless knowable according to Plato. Therefore, convinced of the radical transcendence of God, Philo adds the term ἄδντος (‘unapproachable’) to indicate that the knowledge of God is not accessible to the human intellect.

<sup>60</sup> See “διάστημα,” *PGL*, 413.

<sup>61</sup> See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ecll.* 7; GNO 5, 412–413; See also Gregorius Nyssenus, *Eun.* 1.361; 1.363; 1.381; 2.70; 2.459; 2.531; 3.78; Peroli, *Il platonismo*, 43–51; Douglass, “Diastêma,” 227–228.

<sup>62</sup> For more on this issue, see Ludlow, “Divine Infinity,” 217–237; Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 131–212; Robb-Dover, “Perpetual Progress,” 213–225; Mateo-Seco, “Epektasis,” 263–268.

<sup>63</sup> On the concept of the infinity of God and the influence of Philo’s thought on Gregory, see Geljon, “Divine Infinity,” 152–177. See also Geljon, “Philo of Alexandria,” 225–236; Ramelli, “Philosophical Allegoresis,” 55–99; Bendová, “The Influence of Philo’s *De Abrahamo*,” 91–109.

<sup>64</sup> See Philo, *Post.* 151–152, 174; *Sacr.* 59, 124; *Opif.* 23; *Deus* 79–80.

grasp in their unmixed purity those uncreated potencies, which stand around Him and flash forth light of surpassing splendour?<sup>65</sup>

The comparison of God to a source of light is one of Philo's favourite metaphors.<sup>66</sup> By referring to it repeatedly in his writings, as Francesca Calabi has rightly pointed out, Philo not only alludes to Plato's metaphor of the sun, but evidently polemicalises against it.<sup>67</sup> According to Plato, the Idea of the Good, of which the sun is a symbol, is knowable.<sup>68</sup> For the human eye is capable of becoming somewhat accustomed to looking at the sun. According to Philo, God's essence is unknowable, and the light to which it is symbolically compared is blinding, as is clearly illustrated in the texts quoted above, *Deus* 78 and *Mut.* 6–7. Although God is 'the fountain of the purest radiance,' the Alexandrian notes, 'we have in us no organ by which we can envisage Him, neither in sense, for He is not perceptible by sense, nor yet in mind.' Thus, the doctrine of the unknowability of God's essence flows not so much from the fact that God is a transcendent, intelligible being (like the Platonic Idea of the Good), but from the fact of the radical transcendence of this being, to which the concept of infinity is linked. It is difficult even in the case of God to say that He is a being, since Philo places Him even above the Idea of the Good, which according to Plato is beyond being (*ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*).<sup>69</sup> In fact, there are many statements in Philo's works indicating that God is 'more' transcendent than the highest principles of which Plato spoke: He is 'beyond' the Good, 'beyond' the Beautiful, 'beyond' the One, or 'beyond' the Monad.<sup>70</sup>

And so we must ask, in what would this 'greater' transcendence consist? Many researchers of Philo's thought do not provide an answer to this question, and focus solely upon the assertion that the Alexandrian develops his apophatic theology inspired by Plato's *Parmenides* and his Middle Platonic contemporaries, and that the above-quoted expressions are merely a reference to Plato's *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*.<sup>71</sup> In my view, statements of this kind arise from the concept of the infinity of God, which does not appear in the doctrines of Philo's Middle Platonic contemporaries, and which will only be taken up by Plotinus and then by Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>72</sup> This concept explains why the light that is God is absolutely blinding (although in Plato

<sup>65</sup> Philo, *Deus* 78.

<sup>66</sup> See Philo, *Somn.* 1.73–76; *Abr.* 75–76; *Cher.* 97; *Spec.* 1.279; *Ebr.* 43–45; *Fug.* 165; *Praem.* 45–46.

<sup>67</sup> See Calabi, "The Dazzling Light," 59–67.

<sup>68</sup> We wrote about this in the previous paragraph. See Plato, *Resp.* 508e, and other texts quoted above.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *Resp.* 509b. It is noteworthy that in the above-quoted text from *Mut.* 11–13, God is referred to not only as a true being, but also as the supreme good (*ὁ ἄριστος*).

<sup>70</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40; *Contempl.* 2; *Opif.* 8; *Legat.* 5; *Leg.* 2.3.

<sup>71</sup> See Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 155–158; Calabi, "Unknowability of God," 42–51.

<sup>72</sup> See Mrugalski, "The Notion of Divine Infinity," 69–84.

it only caused a temporary sight disturbance), as well as why Philo's God transcends even the Idea of the Good.

The infinity of God is understood by the Alexandrian in two ways. On the one hand, there is an infinite abyss (ἄπειρον διάστημα) between creation and God, and approaching the infinite, even if intellectually, does not logically reduce the distance; it still remains infinite.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, God, being the infinite Good, possesses powers that also have no end or limit (ἀπερίγραφοι καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι). He is thus able to grant infinite benefits, which, however, due to the finiteness of creatures, will not be able to be received in all their fullness.<sup>74</sup> In the latter case, we are dealing, no longer with an infinite distance, but with an excess of what could be received or known. Having said this, the apparent contradiction that appears in Philo's interpretation of the theophany in Exod 20:21 is resolved: namely, Moses entered the darkness where God, who is the source of light, was. This means that, according to Philo, Moses' seeking intellect was surrounded by an intelligible light so intense as to be blinding. This means that he was unable to capture intellectually what God is in His essence, due to the 'superabundance' of what can be known. Each of the conceptions he had hitherto used was inadequate in relation to what he was confronted with. For the infinite cannot be encompassed by a finite intellect or enclosed in any definition or notion. The infinite God of Philo thus remains unnameable, ineffable and incapable of being embraced by any idea (ἀκατονόμαστος καὶ ἄρρητος καὶ κατὰ πάσας ιδέας ἀκατάληπτος).<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See Philo, *Post.* 15–18: “When therefore the God-loving soul probes the question of the essence of the Existent Being, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boon, namely to apprehend that the God of real Being is apprehensible by no one (ἀκατάληπτος), and to see precisely this, that He is incapable of being seen. [...] The wise man is ever longing to discern the Ruler of the Universe. As he journeys along the path that takes him through knowledge and wisdom, he comes into contact first with divine words, and with these he makes a preliminary stay, and though he had meant to go the remainder of the way, he comes to a stop. For the eyes of his understanding have been opened, and he sees perfectly clearly that he has engaged in the chase of a quarry hard to capture, which always eludes its pursuers by placing an immeasurable distance between them (ἀπείρω τῷ μεταξύ διαστήματι).” See also Philo, *Somn.* 1.63–66.

<sup>74</sup> See Philo, *Opif.* 23: “But not in proportion to the greatest of His own bounties does He confer benefits – for these are without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφοι γὰρ αὐταί γε καὶ ἀτελεύτητοι) – but in proportion to the capacities of the recipients. For it is not the nature of creation to receive good treatment in like manner as it is the nature of God to bestow it, seeing that the powers of God are overwhelmingly vast (αἱ δυνάμεις ὑπερβάλλουσι), whereas creation, being too feeble to entertain their abundance, would have broken down under the effort to do so, had not God with appropriate adjustment dealt out to each his due portion.” For more on this issue, see Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 146–147.

<sup>75</sup> See Philo, *Somn.* 1.67.

#### 4. “Show me your own glory!”: On the Knowability of God’s Nature by Grace

The third theophany occurred in the wake of the golden calf incident, in Exod 32–34. This text is fraught with important tensions, however, since in Exod 33:11 we hear that “the Lord spoke to Moses face to face,” while in 33:20, 23 Moses is twice informed that God’s face cannot be seen! Thus, despite Moses’ repeated requests,<sup>76</sup> God’s response is emphatically negative:

And [Moses] says, “Show me your own glory!” And [the Lord] said, “I will pass by before you in my glory, and I will call by my name “Lord” before you. And I will have mercy on whom ever I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion.” And he said, “You shall not be able to see my face. For a person shall never see my face and live.” And the Lord said, “Look, a place is near me. You shall stand on the rock. Now, whenever my glory passes by, then I will put you in a hole of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I pass by. And I will take my hand away, and then you shall see my hind parts (τὰ ὀπίσω μου), but my face will not appear to you.”<sup>77</sup>

Once again, we find that the biblical text itself already contains certain elements that point to the transcendence and unknowability of God. Despite his repeated request, Moses will not be allowed to see the face of God. As a justification for this impossibility, the author puts into the mouth of God the dogma: “Man cannot look at God and remain alive.” Ultimately, although Moses is accorded an extraordinary revelation of God’s glory (δόξα), he does not behold God’s face (τὸ πρόσωπον). What the lawgiver beholds stands behind God. The Greek expression τὰ ὀπίσω, which appears here, can be translated in the sense of place or time, and thus as ‘things that are behind God,’ i.e. ‘back parts’ or ‘things that follow God.’<sup>78</sup> This mysterious statement obviously attracts Philo’s attention:

It is quite enough for a man’s reasoning faculty to advance as far as to learn that the Cause of the Universe is and subsists. To be anxious to continue his course yet further, and inquire about essence or quality in God, is a folly fit for the world’s childhood. Not even to Moses, the all-wise, did God accord this, albeit he had made countless requests, but a divine communication was issued to him, “Thou shalt behold that which is behind Me, but My Face

<sup>76</sup> See Exod 33:13, 18 (LXX). The Hebrew text differs here from the Greek translation. In the Hebrew version of Exod 33:13, Moses asks God to let him know His ways (i.e. His intentions towards Israel). In the LXX, by contrast, there is a request for a clear revelation of God Himself: ἐμφάνισόν μοι σεαυτὸν γνωστῶς. In Exod 33:18 Moses repeats his request, this time asking that God show him His glory: δεῖξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν.

<sup>77</sup> Exod 33:18–23 (LXX, trans. Pietersma – Wright).

<sup>78</sup> See LSJ, “ὀπίσω,” 1239.

thou shalt not see” (Exod 33:23). This meant, that all that follows in the wake of God is within the good man’s apprehension, while He Himself alone is beyond it (ἀκατάληπτος), beyond, that is, in the line of straight and direct approach, a mode of approach by which (had it been possible) His quality would have been made known; but brought within ken by the powers that follow and attend Him (ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐπομένων καὶ ἀκολουθῶν δυνάμεων καταληπτός); for these make evident not His essence but His subsistence (οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν, τὴν δ’ ὑπαρξιν) from the things which He accomplishes.<sup>79</sup>

In the philosophical interpretation of the biblical theophany by Philo, what comes after God (τὰ ὀπίσω) are the divine Powers (δυνάμεις). It is through them that the transcendent God acts in the world and it is through them that God becomes knowable (καταληπτός) to the human intellect. What is knowable, however, is His existence or subsistence (ὑπαρξίς), but not His essence (οὐσία). In his essence, God remains unknowable (ἀκατάληπτος) to all creation. Only God is able to comprehend Himself, as Philo emphasises elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it is worth adding that also the essence of the divine Powers is unknowable. After all, as we saw in *Deus* 78 and in *Mut.* 6–7 they are compared to a blinding light whose source is in God.<sup>81</sup> This perspective seems very pessimistic. Attaining the knowledge of God’s existence on the basis of His Powers manifested in creation is not much. Despite his many assertions about the absolute impossibility of getting to know the essence of God, Philo nevertheless encourages and endorses seeking and desiring to know God. He makes this point in *Spec.* 1.39–41, in which he again interprets the theophany of Exod 33:18–23:

So then just as, though we do not know and cannot with certainty determine what each of the stars is in the purity of its essence, we eagerly persist in the search because our natural love of learning makes us delight in what seems probable, so too, though the clear vision of God as He really is is denied us, we ought not to relinquish the quest. For the very seeking, even without finding, is felicity in itself, just as no one blames the eyes of the body because when unable to see the sun itself they see the emanation of its rays as it reaches the earth, which is but the extremity of the brightness which the beams of the sun give forth. It was this which Moses the sacred guide, most dearly beloved of God, had before his eyes when he besought God with the words, “Reveal Thyself to me” (Exod 33:13).<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Philo, *Post.* 168–169.

<sup>80</sup> See Philo, *Praem.* 40, quoted above.

<sup>81</sup> See also Philo, *Fug.* 165; *Spec.* 1.47–49. In fact, the Alexandrian distinguishes between two kinds of powers: pure powers that exist in God (their essence is unknowable) and temperate powers that operate in the world and are somehow adapted to human cognitive capacities. See Philo, *Deus* 77–80.

<sup>82</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.39–41.



The ultimate felicity of man, then, is to seek God, even if one fails to find Him, which actually represents the human inability to fully and completely grasp the essence of God. However, according to Philo, it is possible to make progress in knowing God and assimilating to Him.<sup>83</sup> On the one hand, this process is related to intellectual-ethical effort; on the other hand, because of God's transcendence and infinity, progress in gaining knowledge of God is possible only through His grace. This grace and all God's benefits, which are also infinite, are bestowed on people progressing in knowledge and virtue according to how much each of them is able to receive.<sup>84</sup> The capacity of the human mind, however, is not something static. For, as Philo believes, humans are able to transcend their own limitations and thereby expand their minds, ascending ever higher in knowledge of the world and of God.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, God Himself also reaches out to humans and, by revealing Himself in various ways, bestows the greater grace of knowledge on those who seek Him.<sup>86</sup> We have seen in the passages quoted in the first paragraph of this study that Philo allegorically attributes to the individual patriarchs different levels and ways of coming to the knowledge of God.<sup>87</sup> "Each of them is the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained – Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice" (*Mos.* 1.76). Yet Moses, through the extraordinary revelation of God in the burning bush, even though he was not given to know God's proper name, gained wisdom even greater than the patriarchs. He is therefore termed as all-wise (πάνσοφος)<sup>88</sup> and the most beloved by God (θεοφιλέστατος).<sup>89</sup> Elsewhere, however, Philo, similarly treating the figures of the individual patriarchs in a symbolic manner, and speaks of the possibility of

<sup>83</sup> Philo, as other Middle Platonists did, elaborates the concept of assimilation to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν), which is a reference to and development of Plato's famous statement of *Theaet.* 176b (See Philo, *Fug.* 63, where the passage from *Theaet.* 176b is quoted explicitly). Philo, however, links the doctrine of assimilation to biblical themes. After all, already in Gen 1:26 there is the statement that humanity was created according to the image and likeness of God (κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν) (See Philo, *Opif.* 69). Furthermore, the individual patriarchs of the Old Testament become for Philo symbols of the different stages in the process of assimilation to God. Moses holds a special place among them. His life is interpreted by Philo in an allegorical way, as an intellectual-ethical journey of becoming like God. In a particular way, the work *De vita Moysis* narrates this process, but it is not the only one. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Merki, *Homoiosis Theo*, 35–44; Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 145–153; Helleman, "Philo of Alexandria," 51–71; Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 58–65; van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology*, 181–199; Putthoff, *Ontological Aspects*, 95–102.

<sup>84</sup> See Philo, *Spec.* 1.43–44; *Her.* 31–37; *Opif.* 23; *Praem.* 39.

<sup>85</sup> See Philo, *Det.* 90–94.

<sup>86</sup> On this point, Philo anticipates Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of 'εpektasis.' The term ἐπέκτασις alludes to the Apostle Paul's statement of Phil 3:13–14 and indicates the constant 'transcending of oneself' that is present in man's intellectual-ethical process aiming at knowledge of God and union with Him. Because of the infinity of God's essence, the ἐπέκτασις will accompany man even after death, through all eternity, and will never end. For more on this issue, see Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 291–307; Mateo-Seco, "Epektasis," 263–268.

<sup>87</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 11–13, 13–19; *Mos.* 1.75–76; *Somn.* 1.231–234, quoted above.

<sup>88</sup> Philo, *Post.* 169.

<sup>89</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.41.

an infinite progress in the knowledge of God. This progress has no limits, due to the infinite riches of God's wisdom, which is the object of knowledge and at the same time the goal of the process of assimilation to God:

Mark the advance to improvement made by the soul that has an insatiable desire to be filled with things that are beautiful, and the unlimited wealth of God (ἀπερίγραφος τοῦ θεοῦ πλοῦτος), which has given as starting-points to others the goals reached by those before them. For the limit of the knowledge attained by Seth became the starting-point of righteous Noah; while Abraham begins his education with the consummation of Noah's; and the highest point of wisdom reached by Abraham is the initial course in Moses' training.<sup>90</sup>

In the works of Philo, we find many descriptions of such hierarchies and of the various ways of ascent to God, of which the life stories of individual biblical figures become symbols.<sup>91</sup> Sometimes Philo makes a certain general tri-division of people according to their knowledge and progress in assimilation to God. The first group consists of simple people (uneducated or beginners) who perceive God in an anthropomorphic way. The next group are the advancing ones. They are able to deal with intelligible beings and thus more adequately perceive God, His Ideas and Powers. The third group are those who achieve perfection, who have become God's own possession, not through the practice of intellectual and moral virtues, but through their openness to God's grace.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, these divisions, as well as the descriptions of the level of cognition of God by individual biblical figures, are not perfectly coherent, as Scott Mackie has shown in his studies on Philo's mysticism.<sup>93</sup> What is relevant to the topic of our study, however, is that coming to know God is a process that, because of God's transcendence and infinity, has no end. And although God, in the biblical account, refuses to reveal His proper name or His face, in Philo's interpretation the continuing search for Him and the constant prayers and requests for grace are their own reward. This is also the case with the supplication: "Show me your own glory!" (Exod 33:18), which is uttered by a perfect man who has already reached the peak of his cognitive powers. His prayer, which is a request for

<sup>90</sup> Philo, *Post.* 174.

<sup>91</sup> See Winston – Wyrwa, "Philon von Alexandrien," 748, who rightly point out: "There are descriptions in which the way of ascent is through the cosmos (*Abr.* 69–71, 77–80; *Praem.* 41–43), others in which it is through the virtues (*Ebr.* 82f.; *Mut.* 81f.; *Plant.* 36–40), or those which correspond to a more perfect and pure way of thinking, which say that God makes himself known from himself by his own light (*Leg.* 3.100–102; *Praem.* 43–46). At times the initiative lies with God alone, at times human effort is the indispensable prerequisite, and at times Philo strikes a balance between the human share and divine grace (*Mut.* 81–82; *Praem.* 37–39)."

<sup>92</sup> See Philo, *Mut.* 19–26; *Deus* 55–69.

<sup>93</sup> See Mackie, "The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?," 25–47; Mackie, "Means, Methods, and Mysticism," 147–179; Mackie, "The Passion of Eve," 141–163.

help to surpass this limit, pleases God, who wants to grant his favours to those in whom there is “the constant and profound longing for wisdom.”<sup>94</sup> For this longing expands the mind of the supplicant and thus makes room in it for the reception of further graces of the Infinite and growth in wisdom. And as Philo notes elsewhere, “there is nothing which can be asserted with a greater certainty than that wisdom is essentially without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφος καὶ ἀτελεύτητος).”<sup>95</sup>

It is worth emphasising, however, that the growth in wisdom that takes place during the intellectual-ethical process of assimilation to God does not ultimately lead to conceptual or thematic knowledge of God. Rather, it is a matter of an intuitive cognition, and ultimately a cognition of the mystical type, which is a gift of the transcendent God. We find a description of such cognition in *Opif.* 69–71, where Philo expounds the way in which the human mind, created “according to the image and likeness of God,”<sup>96</sup> ascends to its prototype. At first, it traverses and learns conceptually the world, starting with sense cognition. It then ascends to that which is knowable only by the intellect and contemplates the prototypes of created beings, in order to then arrive at the contemplation of God Himself. Then, the mind “is seized by a sober intoxication, like those filled with Corybantic frenzy, and is inspired, possessed by a longing far other than theirs and a nobler desire. Wafted by this to the topmost arch of the things perceptible to mind, it seems to be on its way to the Great King Himself; but, amid its longing to see Him, pure and untempered rays of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled.”<sup>97</sup>

Once again, Philo’s favourite motif appears in the above text, namely the metaphor of blinding light. Although we are dealing here with some mystical rapture and contemplation of ‘the Great King,’ this contemplation does not presuppose a propositional or conceptual cognition. The eye of understanding is dazzled. Nevertheless, the ascent in cognition and further contemplation is still possible, even though (or precisely because) streams of intense light pour down upon the mind. This excess is admittedly blinding, but at the same time it becomes the basis and condition for the possibility of further growth in the acquisition of knowledge of God. The transcendence of God, which is so much emphasised by Philo, does not therefore preclude progress in the knowledge of the nature of God or even its direct contemplation. Quite the contrary, because of the infinite richness of God, this progress can be infinite. By the same token, however, the essence of God remains unknowable

<sup>94</sup> See Philo, *Spec.* 1.50.

<sup>95</sup> Philo, *Somm.* 1.12. See also Philo, *Post.* 151–152: “For the wealth of the wisdom of God is unbounded and puts forth new shoots after the old ones, so as never to leave off renewing its youth and reaching its prime. For this reason all who imagine that they have arrived at the limit of any science whatever are perfect simpletons; for that which seemed to be near the end is very far away from it.”

<sup>96</sup> See Gen 1:26.

<sup>97</sup> Philo, *Opif.* 71.

(ἀκατάληπτος), that is, it can never be enclosed in some definition or encompassed by the finite (though ever-expanding) human mind.

## Conclusions

The analyses carried out above concerning Philo's allegorical interpretation of the three theophanies of Exodus show that within the framework of philosophical reflection on biblical revelation, certain new concepts, hitherto unknown in the history of philosophical discourse, have emerged. Although Philo has made abundant use of the ideas and philosophical language of his time, this does not diminish his originality. What links Philo's thought with the doctrines of his Middle Platonic near-contemporaries is the thesis of the unnameability of God. The Middle Platonists of the second century AD, however, referred to Plato's statements in *Timaeus* 28c or the *Seventh Letter*, where the philosopher speaks of the difficulty of finding God and telling everyone about Him, whether orally or in writing. Their texts thus feature the idea that God is ineffable (ἄρρητος). Philo, by contrast, despite his familiarity with Plato's *Timaeus*, found his concept of divine unnameability in the biblical theophanies, especially the burning bush episode. According to him, the expression κύριος ὁ θεός, which appears in the Septuagint version as a translation of the Tetragrammaton YHWH, is not the name of God but one of His titles, which specifically indicates God's relation to the world. And although some parallels can be found in his argument for the absolute unnameability of God with hypotheses from Plato's *Parmenides*, Philo maintains the God of sacred scripture surpasses in transcendence the Platonic One, Good, Beauty or Monad. This 'greater' transcendence is associated with the concept of the infinity of God's essence, power and wisdom, which in turn links his thought more with Plotinus' system than with the doctrines of the Middle Platonists.

What is also linked to the concept of infinity is the doctrine of the absolute unknowability of the essence of God, which appears to be Philo's original contribution to the history of philosophical and theological ideas. In fact, Philo is convinced that the finite human mind is incapable of comprehending, and therefore of encompassing in some concept or definition, what is infinite. In this regard, he evidently polemicalises against Plato, and specifically with his metaphor of the sun from the Sixth Book of the *Republic*. Indeed, he states that light, the source of which is God, is blinding, whereas, according to Plato, it only caused an initial 'disturbance of sight' for a philosopher beginning to deal with intelligible beings. The question of the unknowability of God's essence also arises within the allegorical interpretation of the two biblical theophanies at Sinai. In this context, Philo's attention is particularly

focused on the statement about Moses' ascent "into the darkness where God was." In attempting to comprehend the nature of God, who is intrinsically the source of the purest light, the human intellect wanders as if in darkness, he explains. For no concept can adequately grasp the object of knowledge, which is infinite. According to Philo, the impossibility of comprehending God is also evidenced by another biblical theophany, or rather, by Moses' rejected request at the tent of meeting. The patriarch, despite his repeated requests to see God, looked ultimately, not directly at God, but at "that which follows behind God." What follows behind God in turn are, according to Philo, the divine Powers that operate in creation and reveal the existence of the transcendent God. The distinction between the unknowable essence and the knowable (at least in part) Power of God will enjoy a distinguished career in later theology.<sup>98</sup>

The concept of divine Powers also is related to another issue that will have a great impact on later apophatic theology, namely the concept of coming to know the nature of the transcendent God through the grace bestowed by God Himself. This grace nourishes and expands the finite human intellect, awakening in it an ever-increasing desire to know God and to receive yet further benefits from Him. And although it is by means of this grace that mystical experiences are possible, as Philo mentions in various places in his works, one should not conclude from this that a complete comprehension of the essence of God by the finite human intellect is possible. For *visio Dei* does not mean a conceptual cognition. Besides, as Philo himself explains when interpreting the biblical theophanies, what the patriarch beholds is only a God-created representation that appears in the intellect of the seer. This is precisely because the essence and Powers of God are infinite. Nevertheless, continuous progress in the knowledge of the nature of God is always possible. In addressing this issue, Philo interprets the life history of the individual patriarchs in a symbolic way, indicating that each of them climbed to a different (successively higher) level of knowledge of God. Yet there can be no end to the ascent to knowledge and assimilation to God. For the wisdom of God is essentially without end or limit (ἀπερίγραφος καὶ ἀτελεύτητος). In the process of cognition, the goal, reached after having travelled a certain path, becomes the starting point for a new path. And what seemed very close to the end is infinitely distant from it – the Alexandrian states explicitly. In this respect, Philo anticipates Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of the 'diastema,' namely the irreducible gap existing between God and creation, and at the same time the Gregorian doctrine of the 'epektasis,' namely humanity's infinite ability to transcend its own limitations in the process of coming to know the infinite God. These concepts will in turn become the inspiration for later thinkers developing apophatic theology.

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<sup>98</sup> As noted above, God's powers are intrinsically infinite and therefore, according to Philo, also unknowable. God, however, when acting in the world, uses powers that are somehow tempered, that is, adapted to the capacities of the finite creatures receiving them. This issue will be taken up by subsequent Church Fathers, who will, however, speak of the essence and power of God in the singular. We will also hear echoes of this Philonic distinction in the medieval dispute over *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinata*.

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# Apophatic and Anthropomorphic Visions of God in Philo of Alexandria

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**Abstract:** Despite his core theological convictions that God is incorporeal, formless, invisible, and unchangeable, in some of his most carefully crafted *visio Dei* texts Philo portrays God “changing shape” and temporarily adopting a human form. However, these are only “seeming appearances” and actually involve God projecting a human-shaped “impression,” or “appearance” (φαντασία) from his shapeless, immaterial being. By accommodating the overwhelming reality of God’s being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, these docetic theophanies allow humans to more confidently relate to the deity, while at the same time preserving God’s absolute transcendence and apophatic otherness.

**Keywords:** Philo of Alexandria, apophaticism, negative theology, anthropomorphism, transcendence, ineffability, theophany, visions of God, mysticism, allegorical interpretation

The creativity and sophistication of Philo of Alexandria’s philosophically oriented interpretations of sacred scripture are apparent throughout his vast corpus.<sup>1</sup> However, as an inescapable result of his attempted fusion of ancient Jewish religion and Greco-Roman philosophy, Philo’s exegeses often are characterized by tensions and disparities, particularly with regard to his portrayals of God and divine-human interactions.<sup>2</sup> Thus, his God is transcendent, yet immanent; abstract, yet personal; free from passions, yet merciful and loving; ineffable, yet susceptible to elaborate description. A noteworthy example of Philo’s creativity and sophistication, in which all these tensions and disparities are evident, occurs in a number of texts in which the philosophically oriented concerns of apophaticism (i.e., “negative theology”) and anti-anthropomorphism converge and coalesce in interpretations of biblical theophanies. In these texts Philo appeals to the scientific concept of *phantasia* (φαντασία), which denotes an “appearance” or “imagistic representation” of indeterminate

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Runia, “The Rehabilitation of the Jackdaw,” 494: Philo “is primarily an exegete who uses philosophy as ‘the language of reason’ to expound the wisdom hidden in the sacred books of the Judaic tradition.” Thus, he is a “philosophically orientated exegete.” It is also important to note that Philo was the beneficiary of a considerable exegetical tradition, of which only traces and fragments survive. On this, see Sterling, “Philosophy as the Handmaid of Wisdom,” esp. 72–89.

<sup>2</sup> The inconsistencies also are attributable to his exegetical orientation. Philo’s treatises typically do not systematically pursue a philosophical topic; instead his discussion is determined by the scriptural text under consideration.

epistemological status, in an attempt to diminish the perceived intellectual offenses inherent in the anthropomorphic theophanies found in the Mosaic scriptures. In the process he preserves God's incomprehensibility and transcendence, while depicting an attenuated divine revelation in bodily form, one which accommodates the overpowering otherness of God's essence to the limitations and shortcomings of human percipients.

## 1. Apophaticism and Transcendence

Apophatic conceptions and representations of God, which emphasize the deity's absolute "otherness" and unknowability, are commonly encountered in Philo's *oeuvre*, and are integrally related to his cardinal doctrine of divine transcendence.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the close relationship of apophaticism and transcendence is apparent in three recurring core theological tenets, each of which ultimately point to God's "distance" from all human frameworks of understanding: (1) God alone "truly exists" (*Det.* 160; *Fug.* 101; *Decal.* 59; *Virt.* 40; 64). He is a being incomparable to any other, completely "transcending any genus or species," since they "are divisions of created things, and involve having other things similar to Him, and thus in some sense equal to Him" (cf. *Deus* 55; *Leg.* 2.86; *QG* 2.54).<sup>4</sup> All attempts at analogy therefore will ultimately be frustrated, since God "does not belong to the realm from which our concepts and images are derived."<sup>5</sup> (2) Since God "alone possesses unerringly exact knowledge of his own nature," his existence (ὑπαρξις) may be ascertained, but his essence (οὐσία), or qualified nature (ποιότης) is unknowable (*Leg.* 3.206; cf. *Praem.* 39; *Post.* 15–16, 167–169; *Fug.* 141, 164–165; *Spec.* 1.40; *Virt.* 215).<sup>6</sup> (3) God is ineffable, or "unnameable" (ἄρητος, *Mut.* 11–15). In these three tenets transcendence and apophatic theology are fused; because God is so very "far away from all creation," he is "unnameable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible" (ἄρητον καὶ ἀπερινόητον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον,

<sup>3</sup> Hay, "The Psychology of Faith," 921, characterizes divine transcendence as the "cornerstone" of Philo's theology. So also Frick, *Divine Providence*, 26: "In Philo's thought, the idea of transcendence functions as the hermeneutic key that determines the shape of the doctrine of God which in turn determines the idea of immanence and establishes the proper place of other features of his thought." See also Montes-Peral, *Akateleptos Theos*.

<sup>4</sup> Dillon, "The Nature of God," 221. Cf. also Termini, "Philo's Thought," 101, who prioritizes God's "otherness" over his transcendence.

<sup>5</sup> Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology," 141. However Philo does enlist analogy while proving God's existence, as recently noted by Weisser, "Knowing God by Analogy," esp. 37–41.

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between essence and existence may have been derived from Peripatetic traditions. Runia, "The Beginnings of the End," 299, defines divine οὐσία as God "as he really is ... as he is known to himself." Translations from the Philonic corpus follow the Loeb Classical Library, though occasionally slight modifications are made for the sake of clarity and emphasis.

*Mut.* 15; *Somn.* 1.66–67). Humans therefore are incapable of making any “positive assertions concerning his essence, quality, state, or movement” (*Leg.* 3.206),<sup>7</sup> for although the “intellect may play its part in the journey to the divine, the divine is ultimately beyond intellectual comprehension.”<sup>8</sup>

While Philo provides the earliest extant example of a developed negative theology, he is by no means the originator.<sup>9</sup> The Jewish scriptures offer unequivocal assertions of God’s otherness (Num 23:19) and ineffability (Exod 3:14; Isa 40:18, 25), and equally influential are Plato’s aporetic reservations concerning human knowledge of the gods and “the names they call themselves” (*Crat.* 400d).<sup>10</sup> Pythagoreanism also “played a central role in the development of negative theology,”<sup>11</sup> and Philo’s use of key Pythagorean terms and concepts, such as “the One,” “the Monad,” divine transcendence, and negative theology, demonstrates just “how pervasive Pythagorean influence had become in the emerging amalgam that is ‘Middle’ Platonism.”<sup>12</sup>

Theologically, apophaticism reflects an appropriate awareness of God’s absolute otherness, as well as his resistance to idolatrous representations. As John Peter Kenney cautions, “we lose sight of the divine whenever we accept as final or complete any conceptual representation of it. The true object of religious devotion and theological attention is not contained in the formulas of its representation ... rather it exceeds all finite capacity for conceptual similitude.” Negative theology thus “subverts our deep human tendency to settle for idols,” and “apophasis saves us from idolatry.”<sup>13</sup> Kenney also notes the ongoing importance of apophatic theology for the life of faith, as it “establishes a spiritual disquietude which calls the soul forth into further and unceasing searches for the divine.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, in *Post.* 21, Philo describes “the lovers of God, who, in their quest of the Existent One, even if they never find him, they rejoice, for the quest of the Good and the Beautiful, even if the goal is missed, is sufficient to give a foretaste of gladness.”

There is some ambivalence, however, concerning the actual extent of Philo’s apophaticism. In fact, expressions of his negative theology can be charted along a spectrum from weak to strong, with some relatively weaker assertions balancing

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the discussion in Winston, “Philo’s Conception,” esp. 21–23.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, *The Mystical Texts*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> So Dillon, “The Nature of God,” 217–219; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 155; Runia, “The Beginnings of the End,” 303–312; Wyss, “Biblical and Philosophical Influences,” esp. 31–32, 38–39, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Plato, *Tim.* 28c: “Now to discover the Maker and Father of the universe is a hard enough; and if having discovered him, to declare him to humans is impossible”; *Parm.* 142a: the One has “no name, nor is there an account or any knowledge or perception or opinion of it”; *Symp.* 211a: the Form of Beauty is “beyond description or knowledge.” Socratic aporia is aptly defined by Ahbel-Rappe, *Socratic Ignorance*, xxxvii: “the vivid experience of somehow, however dimly, knowing, yet failing to define, the virtue, an experience which shines a spotlight on the subject engaged in the inquiry ... reorienting him.”

<sup>11</sup> Bonazzi, “Towards Transcendence,” 240.

<sup>12</sup> Dillon, “Pythagoreanism in the Academic tradition,” 266.

<sup>13</sup> Kenney, “The Critical Value of Negative Theology,” 441.

<sup>14</sup> Kenney, “The Critical Value of Negative Theology,” 441.

and tempering the sort of extreme apophaticism espoused in the aforementioned three “core tenets.”<sup>15</sup> And perhaps most significantly, the same topic can elicit varying degrees of apophaticism, depending on the context. With regard to incomprehensibility and ineffability, the apophaticism of *Sacr.* 94–96 is almost as humorous as it is extreme. Like “snails stuck in their shells, or hedgehogs rolled into a ball,” we are incapable of “rising above” our “human representations” (ἀνθρωπολογέω) of God, “getting outside ourselves in forming our ideas,” and “escaping our inborn infirmities.” Thus, “we think of the blessed and immortal in terms of our own natures,” and “invent for him hands and feet, comings and goings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, anger, and such parts and passions that could never belong to the Cause.” Similarly extreme is *Legat.* 6: “reason cannot attain to ascend to God, who nowhere can be touched or handled” (οὐ φθάνει προσαναβαίνειν ὁ λόγος ἐπὶ τὸν ἄψαυστον καὶ ἀναφῆ τάντη θεόν), and so “it sinks and slips away unable to find the proper words” to describe the Existent. And even “if the whole Heaven should become an articulate voice, it would lack the apt and appropriate terms” to describe him.

Somewhat less pessimistic about the possibility of speaking about God are a number of texts which assert that a “license of language” (κατάχρησις) is permitted, and even though this “license” occasionally issues in deliberate misuse of language, it nevertheless affords proximate predications about the deity (cf. *Cher.* 121; *Sacr.* 101; *Somn.* 1.229–230).<sup>16</sup> Philo presumably avails himself of this license throughout his corpus, while directing his formidable theological, philosophical, and literary talents toward explicating the divine nature and being, and his efforts should be considered at least partially successful. To some extent then, we might view his apophatic language as hyperbolic: assertions that God is “incomprehensible” do not amount to claims of utter incomprehensibility, only that he is “not totally comprehensible.”<sup>17</sup>

A similar range of apophatic ambivalence attends accounts of the *visio Dei*. At the extreme end of the spectrum is *Opif.* 69–71, in which the philosopher’s mind, “possessed by sober drunkenness,” “filled with Corybantic frenzy,” and overwhelmed by “longing” and “desire,” is drawn into the noetic realm and led on the “way to the Great King himself.” However, “pure and unmixed beams of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent” from the deity, “so that the eyes of the mind are overwhelmed by the brightness” and entirely “disoriented.” This text, which is often

<sup>15</sup> On the varying levels of apophaticism in the theologies of Middle Platonists like Alcinous and Maximus of Tyre, see Banner, *Philosophic Silence*, 154–157.

<sup>16</sup> On this, see Runia, “Naming and Knowing,” 83–84, who notes that κατάχρησις can be construed either *positively*, as “extending” a word’s meaning beyond its normal range, like a metaphor, or *negatively*, to describe “the deliberate misuse of a word in order to represent a meaning for which no correct word is available.”

<sup>17</sup> Smart, “Understanding Religious Experience,” 17–18. Smart also contends that apophatic language is “performative,” in that it expresses “powerful and existential feelings” for which normal, everyday words are inadequate.

considered the quintessential *visio Dei* account, is in fact fairly anomalous in its extreme apophaticism.<sup>18</sup> Much more common are texts depicting the successful attainment of the *visio Dei* by a contemplative who is free from fears of being blinded or having their brain short-circuited! In some texts the vision even is accompanied by soteriological and revelatory elements. Most notable in this regard are (1) *Somn.* 2.219–233: divine immutability and stability are soteriologically imparted to the “friends of God,” who “draw near and enter into affinity” with God, while “seeing and being seen”; (2) *Sacr.* 59–60: the contemplative “receives the impression of God’s sovereignty and beneficence”; (3) *QG* 3.42, 55: the *visio Dei* promotes faith in God; (4) *QE* 2.39: seeing God “become clearly visible” is the “true food for the soul,” imparting eternal salvation to those who “partake”; (5) *QG* 4.1 and *Abr.* 119: divine illumination accompanies the *visio Dei*; and (6) *Praem.* 36–46: Jacob’s earnest striving for the vision elicits an empowering and efficacious expression of divine mercy.

Philo’s conceptions and accounts of the *visio Dei*, which attribute to noetic and mystical visionary experiences the potential to transcend God’s transcendence, and bridge the chasm separating God’s essence from his existence, therefore represent the most significant challenge to strong claims of extreme and absolute apophaticism. As John M. Dillon notes, “When one has established a totally transcendent God, there straightway arises in an acute form the problem of his relations with the universe ... in this situation ... a kind of mystical vision is the only thing that can connect us to any extent with God.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, noetic vision offers a raw and rich experience whose immediacy precedes and perhaps even precludes normal cognitive activities. In *Praem.* 43 Philo describes the *visio Dei* as involving “the power to apprehend” God “through himself, without the cooperation of any reasoning process leading to the sight.” Nicholas Banner places noetic visionary experiences in the highest epistemological category, “direct unknowing,” which represents “truly direct modes of approach to the transcendent ... whose efficacy is independent of discursive content.” He admits that “it is difficult to know what to call these modes of approach,” since “they are often presented as being, themselves, ineffable.” Nevertheless, these apophatic “modes of approach”

<sup>18</sup> Similarly extreme is Philo, *Post.* 12–16: Moses implored God “to reveal clearly his own nature,” a revelation that would allow him “to exchange doubt and uncertainty for a most assured faith” (13). And though he “entered into the thick darkness where God was” (Exod 20:21), “that is, into conceptions regarding the Existent Being” (14), he did not see God, since the deity is completely “out of reach” (13), “above both place and time” (ὑπεράνω καὶ τόπου καὶ χρόνου), “transcending everything” (ἐπιβέβηκε πᾶσιν), and “beyond sight” (ἀόρατος, 14–15), leading the contemplative to an apophatic conclusion, namely, “to apprehend” that God “is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that he is incapable of being seen” (15).

<sup>19</sup> Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 157. So also Dillon, “The Transcendence of God in Philo,” 6.

will be termed ‘direct unknowing’ because, while descriptions of them privilege metaphors of contact, unity and ineffability, and tend to deny ‘knowing’ in any normal sense of the term, they nevertheless occupy structurally the top of the hierarchy of modes of knowing (from discursive to non-discursive and finally transcending knowing itself). While they may be from time to time characterised as forms of knowledge, this is never anything except one of a range of partial metaphors used to attempt to signify an ineffable act conceived of as transcending the written text. The awkwardness and paradoxicality of the term ‘direct unknowing’ serves to flag the elusive character of the (non)phenomena in question, which tend to evade definition even as they are privileged above the defining mind and even intellect.<sup>20</sup>

Yet despite their apophatic implications, such mystical visionary experiences are for Philo the “most perfect of blessings” (*Ebr.* 83), the “crowning point of happiness” (*Abr.* 58) and the “most precious of all possessions” (*Legat.* 4).

## 2. Anthropomorphism

Although Philo considers visual encounters with God the preeminent spiritual and philosophic experience, and elaborate accounts of such encounters populate the “pages” of his treatises, these accounts are almost entirely devoid of descriptive detail concerning God’s appearance, apart from his radiance and luminosity (cf. *Fug.* 165; *Mut.* 6; *Spec.* 1.37; *Praem.* 36–46; *QE* 2.47). In contrast, ancient Jewish visionary texts, while reluctant to describe God in detail, offer at least some details, many of which imply that God is in some way embodied.<sup>21</sup> Philo’s interpretations of these sacred texts often go even further than his *visio Dei* accounts, not just avoiding descriptive detail (cf. *Ebr.* 82–83; *Migr.* 169) but deliberately eliminating the “human-shaped” features found in the sacred text. For example, in his most detailed discussion of Jacob’s wrestling match with God at the River Jabbok (Gen 32:24–32), in *Praem.* 36–46, Philo transforms the hand to hand combat into a visual battle. Instead of wrestling with God, Jacob wrestles with the deity’s overwhelming radiance!

The source and motivation of this agenda is Philo’s anti-anthropomorphic bias, which is closely aligned with his negative theology. In accord with the prevailing

<sup>20</sup> Banner, *Philosophic Silence*, 152.

<sup>21</sup> On the anthropomorphic theophanies and visions of God in the Hebrew Bible, see Barr, “Theophany and Anthropomorphism,” 31–38; Hamori, “*When Gods Were Men*”; Knafl, *Forming God*. Cf. also Wagner, *God’s Body*, 29: “The concept of an anthropomorphic God in human form is not called into question” in the Hebrew Bible, for “the OT does not know of any anti-anthropomorphic tendencies.” Nevertheless, as Sommer (*The Bodies of God*, 8) observes, the tendency of much biblical scholarship has been to “minimize, explain away, render metaphorical, or eviscerate, the Bible’s anthropomorphism.”



philosophical expectations of his time, Philo minimizes, relativizes, and “interprets away” the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God in the Pentateuch, and as a consequence, Pieter W. van der Horst believes that “Plato’s doctrine of the absolute immutability of God prevails over Moses’ anthropomorphic conception of a passionate God.”<sup>22</sup>

Philo attributes anthropomorphic and anthropopathic conceptions to human weakness and finiteness. Thus, “our own experience” and perspective entirely determine our conception of God (*Conf.* 98). Though the humorous description of this tendency in *Sacr.* 94–96 has already been noted, a fuller quotation reveals Philo’s anti-anthropomorphic bias:

We are not able to cherish continually in our souls the thought which worthily summarizes the nature of the Cause: ‘God is not as man’ (Num 23:19),<sup>23</sup> and thus rise superior to all the human conceptions of him. In us the mortal is the chief ingredient. We cannot get outside ourselves in forming our ideas; we cannot escape our inborn infirmities ... and we think of the blessed and immortal in terms of our own natures. We reject in words the monstrosity of saying that God possesses a human form [ἀνθρωπόμορφον], but in actual fact we accept the thought that he is of human passions [ἀνθρωποπαθές]. Therefore we invent for him hands and feet, comings and goings, enmities, aversions, estrangements, anger, and such parts and passions that could never belong to the Cause.<sup>24</sup>

The Pentateuch’s many similar anthropomorphic details elicit a range of responses from Philo. As an *apologist* for the law of Moses, he ascribes a pedagogical function to the anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms, characterizing them as divine “training” (παιδεία, *Deus* 54) for those who were improperly educated or lack “natural wit” (63).<sup>25</sup> For example, the depictions of God making threats and displaying anger, though “untrue,” are “beneficial” to those who must be “involuntarily taught by fear” (64).

<sup>22</sup> Van der Horst, “Philo and the Problem of God’s Emotions,” 177. An important antecedent for Philo’s “demythologizing” interpretive techniques can be found in Aristobulus, a 2nd century BCE Jewish Alexandrian philosopher. In frag. 2, in his effort to “grasp a fitting conception about God,” he interprets the anthropomorphic body parts metaphorically, as representing “the power of God.” Nevertheless, Marksches (God’s Body, 38) identifies Philo as one of “the founding fathers of the movement which would come over the course of centuries ultimately to deprive God of his body.”

<sup>23</sup> Philo often quotes Num 23:19, “God is not like humans!”; cf. *Sacr.* 101; *Deus* 53, 62, 69; *Conf.* 98; *Somn.* 1.237; *QG* 1.55; 2.54.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. however the rare admission found in Philo, *Leg.* 3.206: “Who can assert of the First Cause either that he is without body or that he is with body ...? No, he alone shall affirm anything regarding himself since he alone possesses unerringly exact knowledge of his own nature.”

<sup>25</sup> So van der Horst, “Philo and the Problem of God’s Emotions,” esp. 175–177; cf. Philo, *Somn.* 1.234: the anthropomorphisms are intended to “provide instruction and teaching for those who lack wisdom.”

As an *interpreter* of the Pentateuch, Philo employs allegory to locate the deeper, spiritual-philosophical meaning of the Pentateuch's anthropomorphisms (cf. *Decal.* 1; *Spec.* 3.178). That allegorical interpretation causes "the mythical" and offensive anthropomorphisms "to vanish from sight" is equally important (*Agr.* 97). Perhaps one of the most extraordinary examples of anti-anthropomorphic allegory involves an improbable extension of logic: since God does not have a mouth or tongue, he cannot speak:

The ten words ... were delivered by the Father of All ... Did he do so by his own utterance in the form of a voice? Surely not! May no such thought ever enter our minds, for God is not as a man needing mouth and tongue and wind-pipe. ... God wrought on this occasion a miracle ... bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments and fitted with perfect harmonies ... giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounding forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest. ... The new miraculous voice was set in action and kept in flame by the power of God which breathed upon it ... creating in the souls of each a unique kind of hearing, one superior to the bodily hearing of the ears. (*Decal.* 32–35; cf. also 46–47; Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 9.178)

The depth of Philo's commitment to this far-fetched conceit is evident in his conception of inspiration: "for though no voice is given forth, prophets hear through a certain power a divine voice sounding what is said to them"; thus God "is heard without speaking" (*QG* 1.42). Similarly, in *Her.* 259 Philo claims that "a prophet has no utterance of his own"; instead, he is "the vocal instrument of God, smitten and played by his invisible hand" (cf. also *Her.* 266; *Spec.* 1.65; 4.49).<sup>26</sup> And perhaps even more surprising, divine speech rarely is heard in Philo's *visio Dei* accounts.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, as a *mystagogue*, Philo offers those making moral and philosophic progress a window into the mindset of an adept contemplative, one whose conception of God is entirely free of anthropomorphic imperfection. These "comrades of the soul" "converse with intelligible incorporeal natures and do not compare the Existent One to any form of created things. They have disassociated him from every category and quality ... his being is apprehended as simple being, without other definite characteristic; thus they do not picture him with form, but admit to their minds the conception of existence only" (*Deus* 55).

<sup>26</sup> This same concern may have influenced Philo's account of creation in *Opif.*, which is almost entirely visually-oriented, and relatively uninterested in the speech-acts that chiefly characterize the creation account of Genesis 1.

<sup>27</sup> Exceptions are found in Philo, *Fug.* 165; *Abr.* 71, 112, 127–130; *Jos.* 255; *Mos.* 1.69–84; *QG* 3.42; *QE* 2.82.

### 3. Apophatic Visions of an Anthropomorphic God

As we have seen, Philo's strong aversion to the anthropomorphisms of sacred scripture will lead him to explain away (*Sacr.* 94–96; *Deus* 63–64; *Decal.* 32–35), ignore (*Ebr.* 82–83; *Migr.* 169), and transform (*Praem.* 36–46) “human shaped” conceptions and depictions of God. Nevertheless, he does on occasion admit some occurrences of anthropomorphism, most notably the anthropomorphic/angelomorphic appearances of God to Abraham and Sarah (*Gen* 18), and Jacob (*28:11–17*; *31:13*). Yet, given his core convictions that God is “incorporeal” (ἀσώματος),<sup>28</sup> “formless” (ἀειδής),<sup>29</sup> and “invisible” (ἀόρατος),<sup>30</sup> while also being “unchangeable” (ἄτρεπτος),<sup>31</sup> these theophanies force him to address a difficult question: namely, does the incorporeal, formless, and invisible God “change shape” and temporarily adopt a material form? In response to this interpretive dilemma, Philo offers a “docetic” solution: God only *seems* to “materialize” and adopt an angelic or human form.

For example, in *Deo* 3 Philo insists that the “three visitors” who appeared to Abraham at Mamre (*Gen* 18) did not represent “an appearance of men, but of something like men, since the divine does not change and take another aspect,” or “undergo a change.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in *Abr.* 118 Philo contends “it is a marvel that although” Abraham's three visitors “neither ate nor drank they presented/offered the appearance [παρέχειν φαντασίαν] of eating and drinking.” He believes, however, that “the first and greatest wonder is that, though incorporeal [ἀσώματος], they assumed the semblance of human form to do kindness” (εἰς ιδέαν ἀνθρώπων μεμορφῶσθαι χάριτι) to Abraham.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, “the reason for this miracle was to present/offer a perception” (παρασχεῖν αἰσθησιν) of the visitors to Abraham, “by means of fairly clear vision” (διὰ τρανυτέρας ὄψεως).<sup>34</sup> The most elaborate docetic account, in *Somn.* 1.232, 238, which appears to have been inspired by God's reminder to Jacob of the “stairway to heaven” theophany (*Gen* 31:13),<sup>35</sup> depicts God presenting

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Philo, *Cher.* 49; *Abr.* 118; *Spec.* 2.176.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Philo, *Det.* 31, 86–87; *Post.* 15; *Abr.* 75, 79; *Spec.* 1.20.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Philo, *Leg.* 3.206; *Cher.* 101; *Sacr.* 133; *Det.* 31, 86; *Conf.* 138; *Migr.* 183; *Her.* 259, 266; *Fug.* 46; *Mut.* 14, 139; *Somn.* 1.71–72, 148; *Abr.* 74; *Mos.* 2.65; *Decal.* 120; *Spec.* 1.20, 46; 2.165; 4.31; *Virt.* 47; *Legat.* 310; *QE* 2.37.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Philo, *Leg.* 1.51; 2.33, 89; *Cher.* 19, 52, 90; *Sacr.* 101; *Post.* 27–28; *Conf.* 96; *Mut.* 28, 54, 87, 175; *Deus* 22; *Somn.* 1.232, 249; 2.221, 228.

<sup>32</sup> Trans. Siegert, “The Philonian Fragment *De Deo*,” 5.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also Philo, *QG* 4.1–8, which characterizes the same theophany as oscillating between incorporeal and embodied manifestations of the deity. Thus, Abraham's “mind's eye” oscillates between an apprehension of the incorporeal God and his Powers, and three “strange men,” who possessed “most perfect bodies” (4.2).

<sup>34</sup> Trans. Birnbaum – Dillon, *Philo of Alexandria*, 112. See also *Abr.* 131: the “triple manifestation is in reality an appearance presenting a single subject” (ὅτι δ' ἡ τριπλή φαντασία δυνάμει ἐνός ἐστιν ὑποκειμένου).

<sup>35</sup> *Gen* 31:13: “I am the God who appeared to you in the divine place” (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὀφθείς σοι ἐν τόπῳ θεοῦ). Though *Gen* 31:13 lacks anthropomorphic detail, the “stairway to heaven” theophany

himself in the likeness [εικάζω] of angels, not altering his own nature [οὐ μεταβάλλοντα τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν], for he is unchangeable [ἄτρεπτος], but conveying to those which receive the impression of his presence a semblance in a different form [ἀλλὰ δόξαν ἐντιθέντα ταῖς φαντασιουμέναις ἑτερόμορφον] ... an image [εἰκόν] ... to help those in need ... he occupied the place of an angel only so far as appeared [ὅσα τῷ δοκεῖν], without changing [οὐ μεταβάλλων], to benefit him who was incapable of seeing the true God ... (*Somn.* 1.232, 238)<sup>36</sup>

Essential to the mechanics of these “seeming appearances” is God’s action of “presenting” (ὑπόκειμαι, *Abr.* 119, 131), “extending” (τείνω, *Somn.* 1.70), “conveying” (ἐντίθημι, *Somn.* 1.232), or “offering” (παρέχω, *Abr.* 118, 122) a *phantasia* (φαντασία) of himself in bodily shape to the human percipient, who visually “receives” (λανθάνω, *Migr.* 5; *Abr.* 79; *Virt.* 215; δέχομαι, *Mut.* 3; *Spec.* 1.45) the *phantasia*.<sup>37</sup> According to philosophical and rhetorical theorizations, a φαντασία is a sense-perceptible “impression,” or “appearance,” whose ontological and epistemological status is ambiguous, at least initially (cf. *Ebr.* 169–170). Thus, these “seeming appearances” involve God projecting a human-shaped φαντασία from his shapeless, immaterial being,<sup>38</sup> one which accommodates the overwhelming reality of his being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, and which allows humans to more confidently relate to him.<sup>39</sup>

The nature and purpose of these docetic theophanies sharply contrast with Homeric epiphanies, as well as Plato’s “theology of epiphany” (*Resp.* 380d–382a). Although the Homeric gods often appear in disguise, in order to deceive and manipulate

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in Gen 28:11–17 (LXX) describes God as anthropomorphically (or “angelomorphically”) “leaning on” the ladder/stairway (ἐπιστηρίζω, 29:13).

<sup>36</sup> In *Somn.* 1.239 Philo appears to equate the “conveyed” “image” (εἰκόν] with “his angel the Logos” (τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ λόγον). The identity of the object of sight in Philo’s *visio Dei* accounts often is ambiguous. In some contexts the vision appears to be restricted to divine intermediaries, such as the Powers or the Logos, while in many others God himself is seen. A critique of the prevalent tendency in Philonic scholarship to systematize these texts and unjustifiably restrict the vision to intermediaries is offered in my essay, “Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria,” 25–47). Cf. Dillon, “Reclaiming the Heritage of Moses,” 118: “Philo’s God is thoroughly transcendent, and operates in the world only through his Logos.”

<sup>37</sup> Cf. esp. Philo, *Somn.* 1.70: God “extends appearances that proceed from himself” (τὰς ἀφ’ αὐτοῦ τείνων φαντασίας). Additional texts in which φαντασία and φαντασιώ occur in conjunction with a *visio Dei* include Philo, *Cher.* 13; *Det.* 158; *Her.* 301; *Mut.* 7, 17; *Somn.* 1.159; *Abr.* 124, 146; *Mos.* 1.289; *Decal.* 105; *Spec.* 1.40.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Birnbaum – Dillon, *Philo of Alexandria*, 258: the theophany in Philo, *Abr.* 118 involves “immaterial essences taking on human form.”

<sup>39</sup> On the “principle of accommodation,” see Philo, *Opif.* 23: humans are “unable to accommodate benefits to the extent that God is able to confer them, since God’s powers are overwhelming, whereas the recipient is too weak to sustain the size of them and would collapse, were it not that God measured them accordingly, dispensing with fine tuning to each thing its allotted portion.” Trans. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 51. Runia (*ibidem*, 147) further explains that “creation would suffer an ‘overdose of being’ unless the overwhelming nature of the divine beneficence is moderated.”

unwitting humans (cf. *Il.* 3.383–399; *Od.* 13.312–313; 17.485–486),<sup>40</sup> the *phantasiai* of Philo’s deity are entirely devoid of deceptive intent, motivated instead by divine mercy and love. And while Plato’s emphasis on the immutability, perfection, and truthfulness of the deity precludes the “extending” (προτείνω) of a potentially deceptive and illusory “appearance” (φάντασμα, *Resp.* 382a), Philo’s theophanies instead prioritize God’s desire to show “grace” (χάρις, *Abr.* 118), confer “benefits” (ὠφέλεια), and “help those in need” (τῶν δεομένων ἐπικουρίας, *Somm.* 1.238).<sup>41</sup> Perhaps most significantly, God’s “love for humanity” (φιλανθρωπία) underlies a remarkable visual encounter with Abraham, in which the deity responded to Abraham’s “burning and fiery” (ἐνθέρμοις καὶ διαπύροις) desire for a *visio Dei* with an attenuated revelation of “his own nature” (φύσις, *Abr.* 79). Thus Abraham

received an appearance [φαντασίαν λαβεῖν] of him who so long lay hidden and formless. In his love for humanity, when the soul came into his presence, God did not turn away his face, but came forward to meet Abraham and revealed his nature [προϋπαντήσας δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν ἔδειξε], so far as the beholder’s power of sight allowed. That is why we are told not that the Sage saw God, but that “God appeared to him.” For it is impossible that anyone should by themselves apprehend the truly Existent One, if he did not reveal and manifest himself. (*Abr.* 79–80)

This extraordinary text infuses anthropopathic and anthropomorphic details into a theophany that originally lacked both emotional and embodied content (cf. Gen 12:7). Perhaps of greatest consequence, however, is the deity’s emotional responsiveness to Abraham’s passionate desire for a *visio Dei*.

The key role of φαντασία in Stoic epistemology appears to have influenced Philo’s use of φαντασία in his docetic theophanies. In Stoic epistemology a *phantasia* denotes an “impression,” derived from the senses or any other faculty of awareness, and this “impression,” which addresses and elicits both perceptual and conceptual capacities, possesses varying degrees of reliability.<sup>42</sup> According to Stoic theory,

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Versnel, “What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God?” 46, 53: “What did ancient man see when he saw a god? Sometimes he saw a god, sometimes a human shape, sometimes a phantom, sometimes an animal form.” Thus, “ancient man could never be sure whether the person he was talking with was not actually a god in disguise.” Cf. also Homer, *Il.* 20.131: “the gods are dangerous when they appear in manifest form” (χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ φαίνεσθαι ἐναργεῖς); Petridou, *Divine Epiphany*, 32–43.

<sup>41</sup> Particularly relevant in this regard are the differing assessments of *Od.* 17.485–486 by Plato and Philo. While Plato condemns the idea that the gods would appear “in the guise of strangers ... and put on all manner of shapes and visit our cities” (*Resp.* 381d), Philo believes that the legend, though “perhaps not true,” is still useful and beneficial (*Somm.* 1.233). On this, see Roskam, “Nutritious Milk,” esp. 29–30; Grethlein, *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception*, 126–127.

<sup>42</sup> Though cf. the admission made by Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.241: “the Stoic theory of φαντασία is hard to define.” See also Diogenes Laertius 7.49–51; Long, *Epictetus*, 133, 214; Long, *Stoic Studies*, 265–275; Ioppolo, “Presentation and Assent,” 433–449. Forms of the term are employed by Plato in *Theaet.* 152c; *Soph.* 260c–e,

a true impression, one worthy of assent, is characterized as a καταληπτική φαντασία, a “cognitive impression,” with which one can “grasp” something real.<sup>43</sup> In addition to being “vivid and striking” (ἐναργεῖς καὶ πληκτικὰς, Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.402), a “cognitive impression” is (1) actual, since it derives from an object which really exists; (2) it is in conformity with that object, both imprinted and stamped in accordance with the object, and stamping and imprinting itself, like a seal, on the soul/mind of the percipient; (3) and it could not be the same if it derived from a non-existent object (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.18, 77; Diogenes Laertius 7.46, 50; Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.249–252, 402). The process by which knowledge is acquired is compared to a hand gradually tightening its grip around an object: first an impression presents itself to the senses, assent is then given to it, followed by comprehension, or cognition (κατάληψις), which then leads, finally, to a firm “grasp” of knowledge (cf. Cicero, *Acad.* 2.145).

Since Philo would appear to deliberately avoid describing the reception of a divinely-extended φαντασία as a καταληπτική φαντασία,<sup>44</sup> his docetic theophanies occupy an epistemic grey-zone, and offer a humbling reminder that humans are incapable of using the φαντασία to get a “firm grip” on God; unlike the subject of a scientific experiment, they cannot probe, dissect, or control the “evidence” of a *visio Dei*. A level of manipulation and control of this sort also would violate the viewing conventions that were enforced for elite males in Philo’s world, and these conventions would undoubtedly also apply to God.<sup>45</sup> Humans are permitted to see the deity, but not scrutinize; to gaze upon him, but not stare impudently. So while graciously offering an accommodated, yet docetic self-revelation, God maintains his apophatic prerogative and preserves his transcendence.<sup>46</sup>

Counterbalancing these epistemic limitations are the rich metaphysics evident in rhetorical and literary theorizations of φαντασία, and which may have influenced

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264a; *Resp.* 382e. On the history and development of *phantasia*, see Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*; Watson, “The Concept of ‘Phantasia,’” 4765–4810; Sheppard, *The Poetics of Phantasia*, 1–13.

<sup>43</sup> Hankinson, “Stoic Epistemology,” 60, makes an important distinction: “It is not the impression which we can grasp, but rather the impression *with which* we can grasp.”

<sup>44</sup> The Stoic καταληπτική φαντασία plays a prominent role in Philo’s epistemology, and is even connected with noetic perception (*Cher.* 60; *Mut.* 56; *Spec.* 1.288), the perception and/or apprehension of God and his wisdom (*Cher.* 97; *Post.* 169; *Ebr.* 108; *Her.* 314; *Spec.* 1.44–47; *Praem.* 45), and the noetic perception of God with the “eyes of the soul” (*Migr.* 39).

<sup>45</sup> Since most theories of vision were extramissive, materialist, and haptic, gazing “full and long” at someone could be construed as indecent, possibly possessing sexually penetrative connotations (cf. Seneca, *Nat.* 1.16.4). Elite Roman males, as “impenetrable penetrators,” were protected by Roman law from corporal punishment and this same protection appears to have been extended to the metaphysical realm in which the mechanics of sight were enacted. Cf. Fredrick, “Mapping Penetrability,” esp. 258.

<sup>46</sup> In this respect, Philo’s docetic theophanies function like the “glory” traditions found in ancient Jewish texts (cf. Exod 24:16–17; 40:34–38; Num 9:15–23; 1 Kgs 8:11). DeConick, “What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?” 12, notes that in these texts God’s glorious “luminosity” functions “as a mask or screen,” a “covering of light” that “simultaneously covers him and reveals him.”

Philo's use of φαντασία in his docetic theophanies. In these theorizations, which are roughly contemporary with Philo's *floruit* (ca. 20 BCE – 50 CE), *phantasiai* were reputed to possess and/or convey an ideal quality and identity, akin to the Platonic Forms (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.19; Cicero, *Or.* 8–10; Seneca, *Ep.* 65.7; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.70–71).<sup>47</sup> Thus the orator/author who drew on a *phantasia* in the production of visually oriented rhetoric would expect that their hearers/readers should experience the very same *phantasia* as their text was heard/read.<sup>48</sup>

Ps.-Longinus's discussion of rhetorical φαντασία succinctly captures this dynamic of inspiration and mediation: “under the effects of inspiration [ἐνθουσιασμός] and emotions [πάθος], you seem to see what you are describing, and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience” ([*Subl.*] 15.1). Euripides's description of the Furies, in *Orestes*, provides a flagship example of poetic *phantasia* functioning in this manner. Ps.-Longinus remarkably claims that Euripides was inspired by an actual vision of the Furies, and his text effectively mediates this same fantastic visual experience, “almost compelling the audience to see what he imagined” (ἐφαντάσθη, 15.2; cf. 15.4, 8). Quintilian offers what is perhaps the fullest account of the psychological and metaphysical mechanics attending the evocation of a *phantasia*. Like Ps.-Longinus's “fantastic” interpretation of Euripides's Furies, Quintilian characterizes *phantasiai* as “haunting visions” which possess the power to make us feel as though we really are “travelling or sailing, fighting a battle, addressing the people, or spending money that we do not have” (*Inst.* 6.2.29–30). In spite of their numinous power, these sorts of “hallucinations” can be routinely cultivated and exploited. According to Quintilian, an orator must visually immerse himself in the imagined scenario, “bringing before” his “eyes all the relevant circumstances,” and then allow that elaborately cultivated vision to become “indelibly impressed upon” his mind (6.2.31). The orator who has mastered this process and “who is really sensitive to these impressions will have the greatest power over the emotions.” Moreover, the “possessor of this power”

<sup>47</sup> Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.19 is the *locus classicus*, with its assertion that *phantasiai* grant the artist access to the noetic realm: unlike “mimesis,” which is “dependent upon what it sees, *phantasia* will represent that which cannot be seen, since it proceeds with existent reality as its basis” (μίμησις μὲν γὰρ δημιουργήσει, ὃ εἶδεν, φαντασία δὲ καὶ ὃ μὴ εἶδεν, ὑποθήσεται γὰρ αὐτὸ πρὸς τὴν ἀναφορὰν τοῦ ὄντος). On this text, see Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought*, 62–93; Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 320–329.

<sup>48</sup> On the reciprocal role of a *phantasia* in the production and reception of an ekphrasis, see Vasaly, *Representations*, 96–99, 102; Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 26–28, 37; Webb, *Ekphrasis*, 93–97, 110–114. As Elsner (*Roman Eyes*, 187) notes: “What the listener ‘sees’ in ekphrasis is the vision which the orator himself ‘sees’ ... Despite the fact that this vision was subjective (it appeared only in the *mind* of speaker, listener, and artist), it was nevertheless objective in that it bore the stamp of truth: it was (in each case) the same vision.” With regard to the metaphysics underlying Quintilian's important discussion of *enargeia* in *Inst.* 8.3.61–70, Webb (*Ekphrasis*, 93) observes: “he seems to assume that the orator's imagination (the scene that appears to him ...), its verbal expression and the image which ‘appears’ in the audience's mind as a result of these words are both simultaneous and identical, and that this image can be equivalent to the direct perception of a thing.”

is characterized by Quintilian as an εὐφαντασίωτος, someone “most skilled in summoning up *phantasiai*” (6.2.30).

Although Philo’s docetic theophanies appear to be occurring in the earthly realm, in three texts Philo locates the “presentation” of divine *phantasiai* in the noetic realm. In *Mut.* 3 he insists that a divine φαντασία cannot be “applied/presented” (προσβολή) to the “eyes of the body,”<sup>49</sup> instead “it is the eye of the soul that receives the appearance of the divine vision” (ἀλλὰ τὸ δεχόμενον τὴν θεϊαν φαντασίαν τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐστὶν ὄμμα). And while commenting on Gen 18, in *Sacr.* 59, Philo describes God “producing in [ἐνεργάζομαι] the seeing soul” (τῆ ὀρατικῆ ψυχῆ) a φαντασία of himself. Finally, a moral dimension attends *Post.* 8, which warns that deliberate wickedness can result in the “mutilation” (πηρόω) of the “eye of the soul,” which would then preclude the reception of a divine φαντασία.

When considered in light of the rhetorical and literary conceptualizations of *phantasiai*, as possessing and/or conveying an ideal quality, like the Forms, these three Philonic texts lend a noetic quality to the docetic theophanies, infusing them with the highest level of veracity in their representation of God’s unfathomable being. And if we are permitted a certain “license of language,” we might enlist Quintilian to help us more clearly envision Philo’s portrayal of God in these theophanies, now casting the deity as a master εὐφαντασίωτος, one “most skilled in summoning up” and “projecting” noetically-reliable *phantasiai* of his very being to his beloved human friends, affording them familiarity and confidence in their relationship.

## Conclusion

Despite his core theological convictions, that God is incorporeal, formless, invisible, and unchangeable, in some of his most carefully crafted *visio Dei* texts Philo portrays God “changing shape” and temporarily adopting a human form. These theophanies are only “seeming appearances,” however, and actually involve God projecting a human-shaped “impression,” or “appearance” (φαντασία) from his shapeless, immaterial being. By accommodating the overwhelming reality of God’s being to the perceptual and conceptual limitations of the human percipient, these “docetic” theophanies allow humans to more confidently relate to the deity, while at the same time preserving God’s absolute transcendence and apophatic otherness. Philo’s essential pedagogical orientation also is evident in these “seeming appearances,” for he knows that the intellectual and spiritual development of students occurs in stages, and the developing stages require accommodating measures, sometimes even those

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 7.35, which contains a similar phrase: the “application of the impression” (ἡ προσβολὴ τῆς φαντασίας).



that provisionally violate important theological tenets. Although adept contemplatives are not reliant on human-shaped *phantasiai*, since they “apprehend God’s being as simple being, without definite characteristic, and do not picture it with form, but open their mind to an appearance of his existence only” (τὴν κατὰ εἶναι φαντασίαν μόνην ἐνεδέξαντο μὴ μορφώσαντες αὐτό, *Deus* 55), students who are progressing toward perfection are greatly assisted by anthropomorphisms, as they afford both familiarity and confidence in their understanding and relationship with the God of Israel’s sacred scriptures.

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# Apophaticism, Mysticism, and Eoptics in Ancient and Patristic Philosophy: Some Important Examples

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**Abstract:** This article investigates mystic apophaticism in a set of Greek Patristic theologians, profoundly informed by philosophy, especially imperial Platonism: Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius. Both the terminology and the argumentative structure will be examined in each author and important connections among themselves and with 'pagan' Neoplatonists (including Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus) will be drawn. The reciprocal interrelations among eoptics, ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη, epektasis, and ἐπιστροφή and ἀποκατάστασις will be pointed out. The article will argue for the intended double-reference strategy to both 'pagan' and Christian Platonism, as well as Dionysius' veiled response to Porphyry qua accuser of Origen, and the meaning of the charge, levelled against Dionysius himself, of "making unholy use of Greek things"—which is what 'pagans' had already charged Origen with. Dionysius retorted, "it is the Greeks who make unholy use of godly things to attack God!", and this is again what Origen had responded.

**Keywords:** patristic philosophy, mystic apophaticism, Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, eoptics, *mystica*, ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη, epektasis, ἐπιστροφή and ἀποκατάστασις, simultaneous double-reference strategy, Dionysius' attack on Porphyry, the "parricide" charge

I set out to explore how "eoptics," which designates theology as contemplation or metaphysics in ancient and Patristic thought, ideally culminates in a mystical, apophatic union with God. "Eoptics" belongs to mystery terminology. In late Neoplatonism, μυστικός points to contemplation, unity with the divinity, and meta-cognitive experience of the divine. In Proclus, ἡ μυστική (παράδοσις) indicates the mystical tradition, which goes back to the mystery cults, but interpreted in a philosophical light.<sup>1</sup>

In Neoplatonism, thus, one begins to find the meaning generally attached to "mysticism" and "mystic," implying union with the divinity or the spiritual apprehension

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<sup>1</sup> Proclus, *In Parm.* 779f.; cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* 3.12D.

of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect. It is an apophatic approach. In this respect, the connection between mysticism and apophaticism is clear.<sup>2</sup> According to Theon of Smyrna, “epoptics” for Plato coincided with metaphysics, the study of the Forms/Ideas (*Exp.math.* 15, 16–18, Hiller). According to Plutarch, *Is.* 77, 382DE, for Plato and Aristotle epoptics studied “what is first, simple, and immaterial.” Aristotle himself treated theology as a synonym of metaphysics, as opposed to physics: “The theoretical branches of philosophy are three: mathematics, physics, and theology [μαθηματική, φυσική, θεολογική].”<sup>3</sup> The equivalence between epoptics and metaphysics was open to the equivalence between “epoptics” and theology, especially in the definition of Plutarch. This applied to Plato and Aristotle according to the Platonist Plutarch, but became a regular correspondence in Patristic Platonism, especially in Origen, as we shall see: epoptics points to the mystery of the divinity and apophatic theology.

The Greek Fathers recurrently used μυστήριον in reference to the Christian mysteries and the allegorical use of Scripture—although they employed it also in reference to “pagan” mystery cults. Clement has 54 occurrences of μυστικός and 92 of μυστήριον; Origen 134 of μυστικός and 333 of μυστήριον. The latter is so frequent in his works because it is related to the mystical sense of Scripture and Biblical allegoresis, of which he probably is the main exponent in Christianity; a parallel meaning is detectable also in “pagan” Neoplatonism, where allegoresis of ancient myths was part and parcel of philosophy as well, and specifically of theology.<sup>4</sup>

The theology–mysteries connection is well attested already in Philo.<sup>5</sup> In *Cher.* 42 he claims to teach as a hierophant “the divine mysteries” (τελετάς θείας) only to those initiates (μύστας) who are worthy of the most sacred mysteries (τελετών τῶν ἱεροτάτων). These are those who practice the true piety (εὐσέβειαν). Here, we see the virtue of piety as central to the knowledge of God: a characteristic of Philo.<sup>6</sup> Philo can present himself as a hierophant who initiates others because he in turn has been initiated into Moses’ “great mysteries” (μεγάλα μυστήρια, *Cher.* 49—a terminology that Clement will abundantly deploy), which enabled him to reach “the knowledge of the Cause and of virtue” (*Cher.* 48). In this way, Philo keeps to what I have called “the dialectics of apophatic theology”: he speaks of the knowledge of God, the Cause, but at the same time he warns that this knowledge is a mystery.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object,” 167–188.

<sup>3</sup> Aristoteles, *Metaph.* 1026a18.

<sup>4</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory,” 335–371; further in Ramelli, “Allegorizing and Philosophizing,” 331–348.

<sup>5</sup> On Philo’s apophaticism see Mrugalski, “The Platonic-Biblical Origins,” 499–528 in this same issue; thus, I do not treat it here.

<sup>6</sup> See Sterling, “The Queen of the Virtues,” 103–124.

<sup>7</sup> Ramelli, “Philo’s Dialectics of Apophatic Theology,” 36–92.

## Clement of Alexandria

Clement in *Strom.* II 6, 1, mindful of Philo, casts Moses' entrance into the darkness on Mount Sinai as a journey towards the intelligible realities, the Tabernacle containing ('Middle Platonically') the paradigms of the cosmos with all existing beings, to which only Christ-Logos grants access as to "the great mysteries" (*Strom.* II 134, 2). According to Clement, as already to Philo, Abraham sees the place of God from far away (Gen 22:4) because the place of God is difficult to reach.<sup>8</sup> This is what Plato called "the region of Ideas/Forms" (χώρα ιδεῶν), having learnt from Moses that it is a region because it encompasses the multiplicity and totality of beings (*Strom.* V 11, 73, 3; elsewhere in the *Stromateis*, too, Clement equates the χώρα ιδεῶν with *nous*, primarily God's *Nous*, but also the *nous* in every human being. In *Strom.* IV 25, 155, 2 – 157, 2, Clement begins to speak of a God posited by Plato that contemplates the Ideas (τὸν τῶν ιδεῶν θεωρητικὸν θεόν), like Numenius' θεωρητικός God (F16, 10–12), because it contains the Forms of all, as Christ-Logos-Wisdom would do in Origen. Clement is observing that, according to Plato, the νοῦς, or Intellect, is like a divinity which is able to contemplate the Ideas and the invisible God and inhabits the human beings (155, 2). The νοῦς is the seat of the Ideas, and is itself God, as God is νοῦς (νοῦς δὲ χώρα ιδεῶν, νοῦς δὲ ὁ θεός). Note the recurrence of the expression χώρα ιδεῶν. Now, this god who can contemplate the invisible God (τὸν ἀοράτου θεοῦ θεωρητικὸν θεόν) lives within humans and is also human νοῦς; indeed, Socrates called 'god' the Stranger of Elea, because he was most dialectic. The soul depicted by Plato, absorbed in the contemplation of the Ideas and detached from the sense-perceptible world, is assimilated by Clement to an angel who is with Christ, contemplates (is θεωρητικός), and always looks at the will of God (155, 4). Clement, building up the equation, soul : Ideas = angel : Christ, draws a parallel, not only between the soul and an angel, but also between the Ideas and Christ. This becomes clear on the basis of Clement's very notion – surely partially indebted to Philo – of Christ as Logos and, as such, as the seat of the Ideas (again, χώρα ιδεῶν).<sup>9</sup>

In *Strom.* V 1, 73, 3, Clement is using again Philo's exegesis of Gen 22:4. Concerning divine appellatives, such as One, Good, *Nous*, Being, or Father, "none of these, taken separately, can designate God, but all of them together indicate (ἐνδεικτικά) the power of the universal Master" (*Strom.* V 12, 82, 1–2). For Clement, as for Philo, no divine name reveals the essence of God; thus, in *Protr.* 11, 114, 1–2, God is inaccessible light. A divine name rather indicates a divine power and activity, which is knowable. The knowledge of God can be only knowledge of God's manifestations in

<sup>8</sup> See the article on Philo by Damian Mrugalski, "The Platonic-Biblical Origins," 499–528 in this same issue. Therefore, I do not treat Philo's apophaticism unless in connection with Clement and very sparingly.

<sup>9</sup> Argument in Ramelli, "The Logos/*Nous* One–Many"; Dillon – Tolán, "The Ideas as Thoughts of God," 34–52.

the world through divine powers-activities such as creation and providence, which do not convey the knowledge of God's essence. Indeed, there can be knowledge of the Divinity itself, but not discursive or intellectual knowledge, namely not dualistic knowledge as a cognitive relation of knower and known—something that Plotinus later will locate at the level of the *Nous*, but which the superior One transcends: thence, only mystical, non-dualistic knowledge is possible in the case of the One, as Plotinus emphasises<sup>10</sup>—but a mystical knowledge, which is not dichotomous in the knower-known divide, but unitive. Within such a framework, it will not come as a surprise that, like Plutarch and Clement,<sup>11</sup> Philo characterised the instruction in the “Mosaic philosophy” as an initiation into the mysteries.<sup>12</sup> In *Cher.* 42–48 Philo speaks of the knowledge of God in terms of piety and adopts mystery terminology—just as Clement and Origen will do when speaking of theology as “*epoptics*.”<sup>13</sup>

In *Strom.* VII 10, 57, 1–4 Clement describes the soul endowed with “*gnosis*,” which dwells in what is divine and saint, as in a state of “*apokatastasis* or restitution to the highest place of rest.” This will mean to see God “face to face,” with a pure heart. In *Strom.* V 71, 2 Clement assimilates “pagan” mystery purification to Christian confession, and in IV 3, 1 he appropriates for the Christians the terminology of initiation to the mysteries and connects mystery to *gnosis*, in that initiation to mysteries is a high form of knowledge. Origen, as we shall see, will remember this when calling the highest part of Christian philosophy “*epoptics*”/ἐποπτεία, corresponding to theology.

Clement's terminology of mystery and mysticism revolves around μυστήριον, a term that means both “pagan” mystery cults and Christian mysteries or hidden/symbolic truths. References to “pagan” mystery religions are found in *Protrepticus*, while in *Stromateis* these are few. What Clement appreciates is the secrecy of these cults: the Egyptians “did not hand their μυστήρια to anybody, nor did they divulge the knowledge of divine things among the profane” (*Strom.* V 41, 1). In *Strom.* V 70, 7 – 71, 1 and VII 27, 6 Clement praises the purification for those initiated to “pagan” mysteries before they could access contemplation (ἐποπτεύειν).<sup>14</sup> He highlights that in Christianity the path was the same: in V 71, 2 he explicitly assimilates “pagan” mystery purification to Christian confession, and in IV 3, 1 he appropriates for the Christians the terminology of initiation to the lesser and greater mysteries.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object.”

<sup>11</sup> For Clement see Ramelli, “The Mysteries of Scripture,” 80–110; for Plutarch, see *Is.* 68, 378B: “We must take the *logos* that comes from philosophy as a mystagogue.” A comparison between Philo's and Plutarch's theology is offered by Brenk, “Philo and Plutarch,” 79–92.

<sup>12</sup> See on Philo Cohen, “The Mystery Terminology in Philo,” 173–188.

<sup>13</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* I, 176, 3; I, 15, 2; V, 66, 1–4; *Div.* 37. See Ramelli, “Patristic Exegesis,” 100–132.

<sup>14</sup> See also Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* I 1, 13, 1; 15, 2; IV 1, 3, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V 11, 70, 6 – 71, 1; VI 15, 129, 4. Clement elaborates on mystery terminology and Christianises it in many passages, e.g. IV 8, 68, 4.



He also connects mystery to gnosis, because initiation to mysteries is a high form of knowledge, and calls contemplation (ἐποπτεία) “the fourth kind of theology,” the highest, which Plato said to belong to the great mysteries and Aristotle called metaphysics (*Strom.* I 28, 176, 2,1). The aforementioned Plutarch already spoke of “the eropic part of philosophy,” ἐποπτικὸν μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας, which Plato and Aristotle had as metaphysics (*Is. Os.* 382D).

In *Strom.* V 57, 3 Clement quotes, with an adaptation, a letter by Lysis to Hipparchus, according to which it is not permitted to reveal “the mysteries of the Logos” to the non initiated. Clement transfers the notion of mysteries, veiled truths concerning the divinity, from the Eleusinian mysteries to Christianity. Likewise, instead of the “mysteries of the gods,” in *Protr.* 12, 119, 1 he has: “I will show you the Logos and the mysteries of the Logos, by describing them in images that are familiar to you.” The Logos, far from being opposed to mystery qua rationality, is here said to have μυστήρια; this indicates that mysticism is not anti-rational (it is supra-rational, not anti-rational). Both the Gospel of John and Origen—who relied on John and Clement—insist on the divine Logos and on mystery together. The knowledge that forms the core of Clement’s Christian philosophy is nurtured by mystery. Not accidentally, Clement lies at the roots of Christian mystic apophaticism.<sup>16</sup> This mystical knowledge is what the “heretics” (“gnostics” falsely so called) according to him have been unable to grasp: “since they have not learnt the mysteries [μυστήρια] of the ecclesiastical knowledge [γνώσις]...they have misunderstood Scriptures” (*Strom.* VII 16, 97,4).

Clement rejects aspects of mystery cults he deems shameful, but he sees a continuity between classical and Christian symbolism and allegory; before Origen, and after Philo, he is the major Biblical allegorist. He voices the same view as the Stoic allegorists, particularly Cornutus: the creators of myths concealed philosophical truths in them, by means of symbols; these truths must be deciphered through allegoresis (*Strom.* V 58,1), which is the basic principle of philosophical allegoresis, used by the Stoics and by ‘pagan’ and Christian Platonists.<sup>17</sup> For Cornutus, the ancient creators of myths “were not people of no account, but were able to express philosophical truths by means of symbols and enigmas” (*Compend. Theol. Gr.* 35). Clement, who was familiar with Cornutus and Chaeremon of Alexandria, two Stoic allegorists, as Origen was, asserted the very same: “The founders of the mysteries, being philosophers, have hidden their doctrines under myths, that they might not be manifest to all.” Clement appreciated the symbolic expression of ancient myths and mysteries, as Origen would explicitly value the symbolism of Plato’s myths.<sup>18</sup> Symbolic decoding is the same method applied in scriptural allegoresis, which Clement relates to

<sup>16</sup> Hägg, *Clement and Apophaticism*.

<sup>17</sup> As I argue in Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance.”

<sup>18</sup> Demonstration in Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance”; Ramelli, “Origen’s Philosophical Exegesis,” 13–58.

the concept of “mystery” in most of the occurrences of μυστήριον in his works, often in connection with Pauline quotations. Origen would also point to the structural parallel between the symbolic/allegorical/noetic decoding of Scriptural myths and that of ‘pagan’ myths (which he practiced himself).<sup>19</sup>

Clement observes that the Lord “provides an introduction to the ‘gnostic’ symbol [μυστήριον] of the hebdomad and the ogdoad” (*Strom.* IV 18, 109, 2). Hebdomad and ogdoad belong to “Gnostic” and Hermetic terminology; the former indicates the personal perfection of the believer, the latter the gnostic perfection of a beneficent activity that irradiates onto others. The lexicon of allegory is present in Clement’s passage with αἰνίττομαι, “to allude,” with reference to a symbol that alludes to veiled truths: “With these words, by abstaining from evil and doing good, he alludes to knowledge, teaching how to be perfect in works and words” (*ibidem* 3).

Μυστήριον means “symbol” in the allegoresis of the sacrifice of Isaac in *Strom.* V 11, 73, 2: the three days of Abraham’s travel to the place of the sacrifice are interpreted as “the symbol [μυστήριον] of the baptismal seal, by means of which one believes in the true God.” In *Strom.* I 28, 176, 1–3 Clement describes Plato’s metaphysics/theology as contemplation of mysteries inspired by the Mosaic philosophy (Clement uses here Philo’s expression): “Moses’ philosophy is divided into four parts: historical and legislative proper—both pertaining to ethics—third, liturgical—already belonging to the theory of nature—and fourth, superior to all, *theological*: the contemplation, as Plato says, of the venerable *mysteries*, while Aristotle calls this *metaphysics*.” Note the equation between Aristotle’s *metaphysics* and *theology*, which would include Christian apophatic theology.<sup>20</sup>

Μυστήρια in clement’s work can also indicate the Christian mysteries, for which he praises the strategy of concealment that he also lauds—as I pointed out—in “pagan” mysteries. The Lord “has allowed those who can understand to participate in the divine mysteries and their holy light. He did not reveal them to many, because they were not suitable for many, but only for some ... The mysteries are transmitted in a mysterious way, that they may remain on the lips of those who speak of them and receive the word” (*Strom.* I 1, 13, 1). The encrypted modality of the transmission of mysteries is an allegorical expression, which justifies allegoresis. Clement legitimises his own recourse to allegoresis by pointing to Jesus’ use of parables (Matt 13:3, 13; 1 Cor 2:7). Μυστήριον in Clement indeed includes the meaning, “parable” (*Strom.* V 12, 80, 7), and occurs in association with Jesus’s parables, e.g. in *Strom.* VI 15, 124, 5–6; 127, 3 – 128, 1; 126, 2, where Clement hammers home the necessity of

<sup>19</sup> Argument in Ramelli, “Origen to Evagrius.”

<sup>20</sup> The dependence of Greek philosophy on the Mosaic philosophy also underlies *Strom.* V 14, 90: “the meaning of the prophetic mysteries had not yet been revealed before the coming of the Lord”; this is why the interpretations of Greek philosophers can be imperfect.

expressing the highest truths in a figural, allegorical fashion, that they may be accessible only to those who pursue “gnosis.”

Clement’s *Stromateis* expound the doctrines of the main philosophical schools, as he himself observes; philosophy is a preparation for the Christian mystery, and he admittedly employs it to win the Greeks over to Christianity: “the preparations for the mysteries are already mysteries, and in these notes I shall not hesitate to take advantage of the best of philosophy and the liberal arts. For, according to the Apostle (1 Cor 9:20–21), it is reasonable not only to become a Jew for the sake of the Jews, but also a Greek for the sake of the Greeks, so as to win over all.” (*Strom.* I 1, 15, 2).

Greek philosophy contains good elements (although not all of them are “edible”<sup>21</sup>), because it was inspired by the same Logos who is Christ, God’s Logos. The importance of philosophy in the formation of Christians is emphasised in *Strom.* I 5, 31, on the basis of the allegoresis of the story of Abraham, Agar and Sarah, which reveals the symbolic meaning of this episode: “The passages quoted from Scripture can point to other symbolic meanings [μυστήρια]. From all this we can conclude that philosophy has as its specific task the investigation into *truth* and the nature of reality. Now, *truth* is that about which the *Lord* said: ‘I am the Truth.’” The Johannine identification of Christ–Logos with Truth laid the foundation for the construction of Christianity as philosophy; Clement and Origen were major protagonists in this move (John 14:6).<sup>22</sup> Clement, like Origen, thinks that “the culture that prepares to the rest in Christ trains the mind and awakens the intelligence, producing sagacity in research by means of the true philosophy. This is the philosophy that those initiated to the mysteries possess: they discovered it, or better received it from the Truth itself,” namely Christ. Clement refers once more to the mysteries of the Logos, which—since the Logos is Christ, i.e. Truth—is also “the mystery of Truth” (*Strom.* VI 11, 95). The “divine mysteries” (θεία μυστήρια) are learnt by the “gnostic,” the perfect Christian, from the Son of God (*Strom.* VII 1, 4, 3). The latter, Christ, the Father’s Logos, is described by Clement as “the teacher who educates the ‘gnostic’ with his mysteries” (*Strom.* VII 2, 6, 1).

## Origen of Alexandria

The major Patristic Platonist and one of the major exponents of Patristic apophatic theology, Origen, explicated the division of philosophy into ethics, physics, “epoptics,” and (optionally) logic, proposing in fact the Stoic tripartition of philosophy plus

<sup>21</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* I 1, 7, 2–3; I 1, 8, 2.

<sup>22</sup> See Ramelli, “*Ethos and Logos*,” 123–156, and on Clement’s philosophico-theological engagement, Ramelli, “Unity around a Teacher,” 191–223.

*epoptica*. The last branch, epoptics, is the crowning of philosophy. Epoptics is theology, glossed as the science of “divine and heavenly things” (*de divinis et caelestibus*),<sup>23</sup> which Origen deems part and parcel of philosophy, insisting that theology cannot be studied without philosophical bases (*C.Cant.* prol. 3, 1–4). Here, Origen superimposes the three main branches of Greek philosophy to the Biblical books traditionally ascribed to Solomon: Proverbs (ethics), Ecclesiastes (physics), and Canticles (epoptics-theology). Philosophical and scriptural investigation (ζητησις) form one and the same thing. This is why the typical philosophical formula ζητητέον, within a very large use of ζητέω in Origen’s extant oeuvre, partially anticipated only by Clement,<sup>24</sup> occurs also in exegetical contexts, and frequently at that.<sup>25</sup>

Origen also calls epoptics θεολογία—the same domain in which Plato excelled according to the Middle Platonist Celsus: Plato was the “master of things pertaining to theology.”<sup>26</sup> Ethics, physics, and theology are identified as the components of philosophy also in *Philoc.* 14, 2. Origen’s Greek “epoptics” was translated by Rufinus *inspectiva*: “the inspective part of philosophy.” Basil identified epoptics with metaphysics (*H.Ps.* 32, 341A), as Aristotle was believed to have done, as seen.

Plotinus’ *Enneads* were also divided by Porphyry into ethics (I), physics (II–III), and epoptics (IV–VI)—without logic. Proclus will deem Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus “the exegetes of the Platonic epoptics” (*Theol. Plat.* I 1). This included also their notion of prayer.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, according to Plotinus, too, philosophy included the investigation of the divine and the divine realm: metaphysics at its highest level. Aristotle himself, as mentioned, treated theology as a synonym of metaphysics.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Plotinus’ discourse on the One is both protological (the One = first principle) and theological (the One = supreme deity), but theology can only be attempted, suggestive, and hinted at. Indeed, apophatic theology and the inaccessibility of the highest Principle’s essence are common to Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Plotinus, among others, all belonging to Christian or ‘pagan’ Platonism.<sup>29</sup>

In Origen’s *First Principles*, theology is studied on *philosophical* foundations; Origen in Prologue 6 programmatically opens up the issues left unclarified by Scripture and apostolic tradition, to philosophical investigation and in Book IV subsumes Biblical philosophical exegesis under philosophical theology. For the soul must stick to

<sup>23</sup> See above on Theon and Plutarch on Plato and Aristotle.

<sup>24</sup> Forms of ζητέω occur 247 times in Clement, the only Christian who has some occurrences in the technical philosophical sense before Origen—notably, most of these are in quotations from Plato or references to Greek philosophers.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Origenes, *H.Luc.* fr. 83, 14 in Greek; *C.Cant.* prol. 4, 15 in Latin: “we can investigate [*requirere*] why Solomon...”

<sup>26</sup> Τὸν θεολογίας πραγμάτων, Origenes, *CC VII* 42.

<sup>27</sup> On Neoplatonic theories of prayer and links to contemplation, see Timotin, *La prière*; Dillon, “Prayer and Contemplation,” 7–22, from Plotinus to Proclus.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1026a18.

<sup>29</sup> Argument in Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object.”

reason and faith together, as he also explains in *C.Cant.* II 10, 7). Faith and reason cannot diverge, since Christ is Logos. Reason cannot be alone, without faith, because Origen's philosophy is Christian (Patristic), but faith cannot be left without reason, in that Origen's Christianity is philosophy. Immediately after speaking of epoptics/theology as philosophy's culmination, Origen claims that Greek philosophers drew inspiration from Solomon's wisdom (*C.Cant.* prol. 3, 4). Scripture comes first—and lends to Christian philosophy a further, special kind of demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) besides dialectical demonstration: that from the power of miracles and the truth of prophecies (*CCI* 2)<sup>30</sup>—but its teaching is the same as that of the best of Greek philosophy, namely Plato. In a number of cases, indeed, Origen embraces Plato's theories and presents as true philosophy.

Plato had already theorised the philosophical exegesis that Origen also theorised (in *Princ.* IV and elsewhere) and employed, having related hermeneutics (ἐρμηνευτική) to the royal or divine art on account of its directive power (*Pol.* 260DE) and having characterised Apollo as “ancestral ἐξηγητής” who indicates, signifies, and guides, (*Resp.* IV 42BC). Plato prescribed the institution of exegetes to interpret the Delphic oracles in his *Laws*. In turn, Plotinus regarded Plato's texts as oracles to interpret, exactly as Origen regarded Scripture: this will be further stressed by Origen's follower, Dionysius the Areopagite, who will repeatedly call Scripture “oracles” (λόγια).<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, the very fact that Origen's theory of Biblical exegesis is found in his *philosophico-theological* masterpiece, in Book IV of *De principiis*, rather than in *exegetical* works, further reveals that scriptural hermeneutics was for Origen a *philosophical* task, exactly as it was for Plato, most Stoics, and imperial Platonists.<sup>32</sup>

Epoptics, which unfolds in mystical theology, according to Origen is nourished by love: this emerges especially from his Commentary on Canticles.<sup>33</sup> Love (ἀγάπη) is even the principle that, in his view, guarantees the stability of apokatastasis or universal restoration, based on Paul's tenet: ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε (ἐκ)πίπτει.<sup>34</sup> Ἀγάπη ensures the eternity of apokatastasis (as opposed to possible new falls), which can happen only after God's love was made known to creatures through Christ's in-humanation and crucifixion, the highest manifestation of God's love (this, according to Isaac of Nineveh as well, as I argued elsewhere). This is why Satan (and Adam) could fall

<sup>30</sup> On this demonstration: Ramelli, “Prophecy in Origen,” 17–39; also Hall, *Origen and Prophecy*, ch. 4.

<sup>31</sup> I argue this and Dionysius' Origenian legacy in Ramelli, “Origen, Evagrius and Dionysius,” 94–108.

<sup>32</sup> Argument in Ramelli – Lucchetta, *Allegoria* (for the ancient philosophers) and Ramelli, “Allegorizing and Philosophizing.”

<sup>33</sup> See Ramelli, “Apokatastasis and Epektasis,” 312–339.

<sup>34</sup> “Quod sit quod in futuris saeculis teneat arbitrii libertatem ne rursus corruat in peccatum, breui nos sermone apostolus docet dicens: ‘Caritas numquam cadit’ [1 Cor 13:8]... Caritas omnem creaturam continebit a lapsu, tunc cum erit Deus omnia in omnibus... caritatis causas prior nobis dederit Deus” (*C.Rom.* V 10, 195–226).

before being aware of God's charity-love.<sup>35</sup> This is also the reason why Origen individuated the cause of the fall itself in the weakening of love for God, due to satiety (κόρος).

Origen based mystical theology on apophaticism (like Philo, Nyssen, and Dionysius, respectively treated above and below) and claimed that God's nature is impossible for humans to know, as opposed to God's activities, which are knowable (*Princ.* II 6, 1). God's nature and power are beyond being and intellect<sup>36</sup> and "beyond all" (CC VII 45); so, humans cannot "see and observe," "contemplate," or "noetically perceive" them, but just "peer at" them (*C.Io.* XIX 6, 35–38). At the same time, God is the supreme Being (*ibidem; Princ.* I 3, 5), Being in the fullest sense;<sup>37</sup> creatures participate in God's Being (CC VI 64). Mindful of Exod 3:14, Origen kept Plato's equation between God, the Being, and the Good. God being the Good, God's power (δύναμις) is good and God's operation or activity (ἐνέργεια) manifests itself in the goodness of the divine creation and divine Providence.<sup>38</sup> But Origen, also mindful of Plato himself (*Resp.* 509B), and perhaps even with an eye to Plotinus' One (a theory that was in the making or already fixed when Origen wrote *Contra Celsum* in the late 240s), stated that God is beyond Being and Nous, thereby hinting at divine transcendence (CC VI 64 etc.). God, being Monad-Henad (*Princ.* I 1, 6), is simple and therefore unknowable, like Plotinus' One, and incomprehensible (*Princ.* I 1, 5). But God's works and self-revelation in Scripture can be known, and God can be experienced in a mystical union.<sup>39</sup>

This union is the focus of Origen's commentary on Canticles, interpreted spiritually as expressing the mystical union of the soul with Christ, and of the church with Christ. For Origen, the mystical union with Christ-God implies a soul's infinite perfecting in knowledge and love.<sup>40</sup> In prol. 3, 16, Origen describes mystical theology (*mystica*, corresponding to epoptics) as the highest part of Christian philosophy after ethics, physics, and dogmatics: the ascent to the contemplation of the God through love: "through pure, spiritual love, one ascends to the mystical level, to

<sup>35</sup> To the objection that love could not impede Satan's fall, or Adam's, Origen replies exactly that this fall took place *before* the manifestation of Christ's love: *antequam erga beneficia Filii Dei caritatis uinculis stringeretur* (*C.Rom.* V 10, 227–230).

<sup>36</sup> Origenes, *C.Io.* XIX 6, 35–38; CC VI 64; VII 38.

<sup>37</sup> Origenes, *C.Io.* XX 18, 159; cf. God as "invisible and incorporeal essence," CC VI 71.

<sup>38</sup> Origenes, *Princ.* II 9, 1; III 5, 2; IV 4, 8.

<sup>39</sup> This was postulated by Plotinus as well; see "The Divine as Inaccessible Object." Plotinus also posited love as directed towards Beauty, which in its highest form is the Intellect, and perhaps also the One. Evidence about the One as Beauty in Smith, *Plotinus, Ennead I.6*, 123–124. Plotinus, *Enn.* I 6 presents the theme of ascent from sensible beauty to intelligible Beauty.

<sup>40</sup> Origenes, *C.Cant.* III 6, 9: *innovatur semper agnitio secretorum arcanorumque revelatio per sapientiam Dei, non solum hominibus sed et angelis*, "the learning of secrets and the revelation of hidden things is ever being renewed, by God's Wisdom, not only to humans but also to angels." The identification of *caritas* with the summit of perfection is also in I 6, 8; prol. 2, 43. On the excellence of love see also III 7, 27.

the contemplation of the divinity.”<sup>41</sup> The soul’s love for Christ is salvific<sup>42</sup> and the “grace of love is preminent,” since, with Paul (as in *C.Rom.* V 10), “love is greater than all, the only one that never falls” (*C.Cant.* III 7, 27), This is because love causes rational creatures to adhere to God entirely.<sup>43</sup> This is why, as seen, Satan could fall before being aware of God’s love; this is why it is thanks to love that apokatastasis will never be undone; and this is why Origen considered the end better than the beginning. For in the end rational creatures will adhere to God not as a datum of creation, but voluntarily, after rejecting evil, in endless love striving—which anticipates Gregory’s *epektasis*<sup>44</sup>—that, as seen, will prevent further falls. Ἀγάπη prevented Christ’s *logikon* from falling and united it to God so perfectly that Good became its nature (*Princ.* II 6, 5). And ἀγάπη will prevent all creatures from falling out from apokatastasis.

Porphry, who was aware of both Origen’s and Plotinus’ apophaticism, in *Abst.* II 34 posited a hierarchy of sacrificial offerings and remarked that the only sacrifice suitable to the supreme God is the silent contemplation of the supreme God by an intellect free from passions, an intellectual offering (νοερά θυσία), as opposed to the ὑλική θυσία to be devoted to the evil daemons, but also to the traditional gods of the city, and even different from the rational hymns to be devoted to the intelligible gods. This reminds me of Paul’s λογική λατρεία in *Rom* 12:1.<sup>45</sup> The silence with which we should honour the One, which will return prominently in Gregory of Nyssa’s apophatic theology, transcends both the λόγος ἐνδιάθετος and the λόγος προφορικός, which Porphyry develops in *Abst.* III 75. Porphyry seems to have employed this distinction to refute Origen’s Christian Logos, specifically his interpretation of the Logos in *John* 1:1. Porphyry arguably criticises the Johannine representation of Christ as God’s Logos by reading it through the lenses of Origen’s understanding of

<sup>41</sup> *Ad mystica atque ad divinitatis contemplationem sincero et spiritali amore conscenditur—amor correspondens* to ἔρωσ.

<sup>42</sup> *Salutari in eum amore succendi*, prol. 3, 23; *salutare ab ipso vulnus accipiet et beato igne amoris eius ardebit*, prol. 2, 17. Cf. prol. 2, 17: *amore caelesti agitur anima ... vulnus amoris acceperit*, “the soul is moved by heavenly love ... it has received the wound of love.” The soul’s, or the church’s, salvific love of the Logos is in the focus of the commentary from its opening: Solomon “sang an epithalamium in the person of a bride who is going to marry, and who burns with heavenly love for her bridegroom, who is God’s Logos. For the soul, or the church, is in love with him” (prol. 1, 1).

<sup>43</sup> ἡ ἀγάπη κολλᾷ ἡμᾶς τῷ Θεῷ, Origenes, *H.Ier.* 5, 2.

<sup>44</sup> I argued for Origen’s influence on Gregory’s doctrine of *epektasis* in Ramelli, “Apokatastasis and *Epektasis*.” Besides Origen, another important source of inspiration for Gregory’s notion of *epektasis* may have been Plotinus.

<sup>45</sup> For a recent analysis and contextualisation of this passage, see Schnabel, “ἡ λογική λατρεία in *Romans* 12:1,” 280–296, who interprets Paul’s λογική λατρεία not only as “rational cult” but also as “cults made of words” (rather than on sacrificial offerings); Scott, “Your Reasoning Worship,” 500–532, who interprets λογική λατρεία as a ‘reasoning’ or ‘rational cult’. Actions are λογικαί if guided by rational deliberation; Paul’s λογική λατρεία is a service performed by the reasoning mind. Paul expected ethical guidance to come primarily from rational deliberation.

the Son having the same οὐσία as the Father but a different ὑπόστασις;<sup>46</sup> “If [the Son] is a logos, it is either expressed [προφορικός] or immanent [ἐνδιάθετος]. But if it is expressed, it is not substantial [οὐσιώδης], because at the same time as it is uttered, it has already gone. If, on the other hand, it is immanent, it will be inseparable from the Father’s nature [φύσεως]; in which case, how is it that it has separated and from there has descended to life?” (*ap. Psell. Op. theol.* 75, 107–10). Porphyry (like Amelius, I suspect) was reading John 1:1 with Origen’s interpretation of Christ-Logos in mind; therefore he argued that, if the Logos is προφορικός, it cannot have an οὐσία, let alone a divine οὐσία, and if it is ἐνδιάθετος, it cannot have any ὑπόστασις of its own, separated from that of the Father. Porphyry’s parallel fr. 86 is also telling, in that it shows that he argues that Christ-Logos, being neither προφορικός nor ἐνδιάθετος, cannot be a Logos at all. This conclusion is diametrically opposed to Origen’s and, I surmise, is aimed at refuting it, and, more broadly, the whole Christian doctrine of Christ-Logos.<sup>47</sup>

## Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa was deeply influenced by Origen in his mystical exegesis of the Song of Songs (*Canticum Canticorum*, abbreviated *CantC*), and in Homily 7 he develops Origen’s hermeneutical strategy. Origen, as mentioned, allegorised *CantC* as the love between Christ and the church or the soul.<sup>48</sup> Nyssen mainly interpreted *CantC* as an allegorical expression of the soul’s infinite tension (ἐπέκτασις) towards God.

In times close to those of Gregory, Ambrose also shows a dependence on Origen’s commentary, although not in a commentary or homilies on *CantC* proper, but in *Isaac De Anima*, which is all about mystical theology, the soul’s ascent, and union with the divine. Ambrose depends on Origen here, as well as on Plotinus.<sup>49</sup> In *Isaac De Anima*, Ambrose follows Plato’s *Phaedo*, which was emulated by Nyssen in *De Anima*, in insisting programmatically that one should “lift up one’s soul and draw it away from the body” (*elevare animam, a corpore abducere*, 1, 1; cf. 4, 11, 4, 13). He even goes so far as to describe the body as a *vestmentum* that does not constitute human identity (2, 3). Ambrose’s dependence on Origen’s Commentary on *CantC* here in *Isaac De Anima* is especially clear from his allegorisation of Rebecca, Isaac’s

<sup>46</sup> The fragment is reported by three Byzantine authors, but only one version was included in Harnack’s collection as fr. 86, 132 the two other versions come from Psellus. The most complete and relevant to the present argument is Psellus’s first quotation, which I cite.

<sup>47</sup> Full argument in Ramelli, “Origen, Greek Philosophy, and Hypostasis,” 334–336 and 347. Edition of Porphyry’s fragment in Psellus: Goulet, “Fragments du traité de Porphyre ‘Contre les Chrétiens,’” 141–44.

<sup>48</sup> *Adamavit enim eum* [God’s Logos] *sive anima... sive ecclesia* (prol. 1, 1).

<sup>49</sup> McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 202–216.



bride, as *vel ecclesia vel anima* (1, 1–2; 3, 8): the double allegorisation applied by Origen to the bride: *sive anima sive ecclesia*. Even Origen's detail of the *vulnus amoris* that wounds the soul (*C.Cant.* prol. 2, 17) appears again in Ambrose as *vulnus caritatis* (*Isaac* 3, 8).

In his homilies on *CantC*, Gregory took this book to describe the soul's mystical union with God. Gregory explicitly refers to Origen's bountiful exegesis and calls Origen "laborious" (φιλόπονος, *H.Cant.* 13, 3), as Athanasius, who called him φιλοπονώτατος. Gregory developed and emphasised the connection, established by Origen, between mysticism and love from his earliest to his latest works: from *De virginitate*, probably from 371/2, through *Vita Moysis*, to the last work, his Homilies on the *CantC*,<sup>50</sup> which make the most of that connection.

In *De virginitate*, the Platonic framework for the nexus between love and mysticism is manifest, and is provided by the 'pagan' Platonists Plato and Plotinus, since this work studies humans' desire for the beautiful against the background of Plato's *Symposium* and Plotinus' *Enn.* I 6 and VI 9. Instead, in Gregory's last work, the Homilies on *CantC*, the model is mainly a *Christian* Platonist—Origen. Gregory knew Plotinus as well, who also attributed Eros to the Good in *Enn.* VI 8, 15. Also, in *C.Eun.* II 91 Gregory insists that it is impossible to approach God without πίστις, which unites human nous to the "incomprehensible nature" of God. Plotinus, as I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>51</sup> also described the mystical union with the One in terms of πίστις, bestowing on the latter a more positive value than it has in Plato.

The mystical approach to God on the part of the soul is propelled by love in Gregory's Homilies on *CantC*, in the wake of Origen. Gregory dedicated his homilies to Deaconess Olympias, a sympathiser of Origen and his followers. She defended the Origenian monks expelled from Egypt by Theophilus.<sup>52</sup> They were received in Constantinople by her and, on her recommendation, her bishop John Chrysostom.<sup>53</sup> It is no accident that Gregory dedicated to the σεμνοπρεπεστάτη Origenian Olympias his last work, in which he followed Origen's exegesis and theology in many respects, including the role of love (called both ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ, joined already by Origen and later by Dionysius) in the ascent to God. The dedication to Olympias significantly comes in a Preface that defends Biblical allegoresis in the Origenian tradition, which detects the φιλοσοφία hidden in *CantC*, revealing that it is all about spiritual love, which leads up to God. In his Preface, Gregory programmatically and overtly speaks for Origen's allegoresis. Against "certain churchmen" who attacked Origen, Gregory endorses the investigation into Scripture's αἰνίγματα and ὑπόνοιαι. The terminology itself refers to allegoresis and noetic exegesis and is Origen's—note the absence of

<sup>50</sup> On the dating of these homilies after the *Life of Moses* see Dünzl, "Gregor von Nyssa's Homilien," 371–381.

<sup>51</sup> Ramelli, "Mysticism and Mystic Apophaticism."

<sup>52</sup> See Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, 584–591.

<sup>53</sup> Socrates, *HE* VI 7–9; Sozomen, *HE* VIII 11–13.

ἀλληγορία, exactly as in Origen's works addressed to Christians: Origen and Gregory had an aversion to this word, owing to its relation to "pagan" allegoresis of myths. Also, Gregory's characterisation of *CantC* as the Holy of Holies follows Origen's inclusion of *CantC* in the δευτερώσεις as Scripture's culmination. These are endowed with an exclusively spiritual meaning.

Origen's heritage in Gregory's homilies on *CantC* is clear in the main doctrines and exegetical lines, among which the theme of the role of love in the mystical ascent to God is paramount, even to the point of verbal borrowings from Origen's commentary. Gregory's exegesis of 1 Cor 15:28 also takes every passage of its main argument, and many words, from Origen.<sup>54</sup> Gregory never ceased to follow Origen. Gregory's reception of Origen was insightful; he is likely the theologian who best understood Origen's thought.<sup>55</sup> Gregory abundantly used Origen's Commentary on *CantC*, but oriented his interpretation toward the main themes of his own spirituality,<sup>56</sup> primarily soul's tension out of itself towards the knowledge of God, which is a mystical union in an theological apophatic context. Such a tension is a progression without end, since God's nature, infinite as it is, is always beyond creatural reach, and this ascent to God takes place through love. Gregory shared Origen's position that *CantC* is about love, which he, like Origen, calls both ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ. Gregory immediately declares that in *CantC* God, "who wants all humans to be saved and reach the knowledge of truth" (1 Tim 2:4), reveals "the most perfect way of salvation: through ἀγάπη" (*H.Cant.* 1, GNO 6, 15).

Love is the focus of *CantC*, and love is God according to John: "Call God 'Mother' or 'Love' and you will not be mistaken, for God is Love, as John stated."<sup>57</sup> This is revelation; for Origen and Gregory, God's essence is ungraspable; it can be known by a mystical union with Christ-Logos symbolised by a love union. In Origen's words, "the mind that has been purified and has surpassed all material things, so as to be certain of the contemplation of God, is divinised by the objects it contemplates" (*C.Io.* XXII 27, 338). Origen referred to Plato's *Symposium* when stating that Greek philosophers already explored love's nature in "banquets of discourses" (dialogues), finding correctly that "love's power is none other than that which leads the soul from earth to heaven's lofty heights and the highest beatitude can only be attained under the stimulus of love's desire." Plato in the *Symposium*, through Diotima, spoke of the "philosophical lover" (249A) and identified the *erōs* that raises the beloved to the possession of the Good with the Higher Mysteries (211–212). It moved the beloved up the path of dialectic with a kind of *erōs* that "loves the Good with the aim to make it one's own forever" (206A). Indeed, "Plato is not an intellectualist pure and simple:

54 See Ramelli, "Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology," 445–478.

55 Ramelli, "Reception of Origen's Thought," 443–467.

56 Placida, "La presenza di Origene," 33–49.

57 GNO 6, 214, 10; cf. 120, 17; 370, 12.

for him, reason is fuelled by desire (*erōs*). In Plato, *erōs* includes all human desires... we also have desire (ἔρωσ) for truth.”<sup>58</sup>

Origen distinguished passionate love (ἔρωσ) from charity-love (ἀγάπη); Scripture uses most frequently ἀγάπη, and sometimes ἔρωσ—only when there is no possibility of mistaking it for a passion; with this proviso, ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ in Scripture can be taken as interchangeable (*C.Cant.* prol. 2, 22–23, 25, 33).<sup>59</sup> Loving Christ-Logos entails attaining likeness to God: “Since God is ἀγάπη, and God’s Son is ἀγάπη, He requires in us something like Him, that through this ἀγάπη in Christ Jesus, we may be allied to God-ἀγάπη in a sort of blood kinship through this name of ἀγάπη.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the God-intellect relation is expressed by Gregory in terms of ἀγάπη, and even ἔρωσ, already used by Origen in reference to divine love in a Christianisation of Plato’s ἔρωσ. In reference to divine love, Gregory defines ἔρωσ as “intense ἀγάπη” (ἐπιτεταμένη, *Cant* 13, GNO 6, 383, 9) of the soul’s love for God: “Wisdom speaks clearly in Proverbs, describing ἔρωσ of the divine Beauty. This love is irreproachable, a passion without passion oriented toward incorporeal objects”; “ἔρωσ for God derives from sentiments opposite to those which produce corporeal desire.”<sup>61</sup> Origen pointed out the same distinction in the Prologue to his Commentary on *CantC*.

Love and apokatastasis were closely related in Origen’s view and then in Gregory’s. After the manifestation of God’s love, in the *telos*, perfect love in each *logikon* will prevent new falls, since in Paul’s words, as seen, “love never falls (out),” ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε (ἐκ)πίπτει. Now, Gregory echoes Paul through Origen when he declares that “no creature of God will fall out [μηδενὸς ἀποπίπτοντος] of God’s Kingdom” (*Tunc et ipse*, GNO 3/2, 13–14). Gregory and Origen saw in apokatastasis perfect, indefectible love. Sin, as a lack of love, caused the initial fall, love produces the opposite movement of restoration: “Sin separated rational creatures from one another, but once *the love of God has joined them again*, they will utter again that hymn of praise” (*Inscr.* 1, 9). Indeed, in *Inst.* 50, 1–4, too, Gregory emphasises the link between eros-desire and ascent, and details that this ascent, triggered by desire, must take place through virtue—the opposite of sin, which produces one’s re-ascent to God: “the one who desires to become the bride of Christ must be assimilated to the beauty of Christ through virtue according to his ability” (with an echo of *Theaet.* 176AB).

In his Commentary on *CantC*, followed by Gregory in his Homilies, Origen identified ἀγάπη with perfection.<sup>62</sup> Out of love, some *logika* descend to earth to assist in the process of salvation (*C.Io.* II 31, 187–188; *Princ.* II 9, 7). Liberation from evil

<sup>58</sup> Nightingale, “Plato: Dialogues.”

<sup>59</sup> Rufinus renders ἀγάπη by *caritas vel dilectio*, and ἔρωσ by *cupido seu amor* (Origenes, *C.Cant.* prol. 2, 20).

<sup>60</sup> See King, *Origen on the Song of Songs*, 234–240.

<sup>61</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Cant* 1, GNO 6, 23, 12; 192, 1. One example of Gregory’s application of the ἔρωσ terminology to God and the ascent to God is found in *Cant* I, GNO 6, 27, 8–15.

<sup>62</sup> *Summa perfectionis in caritate consistit: caritas nihil iniquitatis admittit* (I 6, 8); *in caritatis perfectione et omne mandatum restaurari dicitur et legis virtus prophetarumque pendere* (prol. 2, 43).

will be the beginning of the infinite process of tension toward God and happiness;<sup>63</sup> from this infinite ascent there will be no movement away, thanks to love's gluing force that Origen described, as seen, and Gregory took over: if the *logika* "reach Christ's incomprehensible, ineffable true being, they will no longer walk or run, but will be, in a way, tied by the bonds of Christ's love, will adhere to it... one spirit with Christ, and in them the saying will be fulfilled, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, and we are One, so may also they be one in Us'" (*C.Cant.* I 4, 9).<sup>64</sup> Still in Homily 15 on *CantC* (GNO 6, 439), as earlier in *De anima*, Gregory states that the soul "must purify itself from anything material, even any material thought, and change into what is intellectual and immaterial, a splendid image of the Archetype's Beauty."

God "transcends every movement of our discursive mind" (διάνοια, *CE* II 1, 397). God's nature is impossible to "touch" and "conceive" and "superior to any grasp provided by reasoning" (*CE* II 158, with the same terminology as in Plotinus). Gregory, inspired by Plotinus, thought that the divinity is impossible to grasp because it is infinite, a tenet anticipated by Origen and already by Clement;<sup>65</sup> this also means that it is eternal, another tenet of Origen (God alone is eternal), while evil, its opposite, is neither infinite nor eternal. Humans are indeed paradoxical finite images of the infinite and eternal.<sup>66</sup> Divine names in Scriptures do not reveal God's "unnamable and ineffable" nature, but describe something of what concerns it (περί αὐτήν, as in Plotinus and Origen,<sup>67</sup> with whose ideas Gregory was familiar), yet this something "does not at all indicate what divine nature is in its essence" (*Abl.*, GNO 3/1, 42–43). In Gregory's Homilies on *CantC* 2, God's name is said to be "beyond any other name, inexpressible and incomprehensible to any rational being." Likewise in Homily 6: "How is it possible that the One beyond every name be found by means of the pronunciation of a name?" Indeed, "the divine, from the viewpoint of its nature, is ungraspable/untouchable and incomprehensible ... ineffable and inaccessible to reasoning" (*CE* II 1, 265–266).

<sup>63</sup> *Neque vero putandum est finem esse beatitudinis, si a malis liberemur: initium felicitatis est carere peccato* (Origenes, *H.Ez.* 1, 12).

<sup>64</sup> See Ramelli, "Dynamic Unity."

<sup>65</sup> On Origen, suggestions in Ramelli, "Apokatastasis and Epektasis." The notion was already present in Clement: "The One [Hen] is indivisible, and therefore infinite [ἄπειρον], not because it is impossible to go through it, but because it is adimensional [ἀδιάστατον] and limitless, and therefore shapeless and without name [ἄωνόμαστον]" (Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V 12, 81, 6). Clement, not accidentally, was recognised by Dionysius as "a philosopher" (Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 5, 9).

<sup>66</sup> See Motia, *Imitations of Infinity*, and my invited review in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* forthcoming.

<sup>67</sup> Origen used in a similar sense the expression τὰ περί (CC VI 65). It was already employed by Clement in a passage dealing precisely with the abstractive process in the human knowledge of God (*Strom.* V 11, 71, 3). Origen elaborated on it in *C.Io.* XIII 21, 124: it is possible to find in Scripture clues to say "something" (τι) "regarding God's nature or essence," περί οὐσίας θεοῦ. The same expression is found in Plotinus, *Enn.* V 3, 14: the One is ineffable, because to say "something about [περί] it" is "to say something," τι, but the One is not "some thing," a thing among others. The same idea and phrase will appear in Dionysius (*CH* II 3), who was influenced by Proclus.

Thus, God's existence is knowable to us, but not God's nature (*CE* II 1, 247–248). Gregory's mystical interpretation of Moses' entering the darkness where God is (*Exod* 20:21)<sup>68</sup> follows Philo and Origen: Gregory distinguishes again between God's essence/nature, unknowable, and God's existence, knowable and known. He draws the same connection as Philo did between *Exod* 20:21 and *Ps* 17:12 ("He made darkness his hideaway; around him was his tent, dark water in clouds of air") in reference to the same allegoresis of the unknowability of God's nature. This connection is also in Origen:<sup>69</sup> Gregory, as often, is filtering Philo through Origen.<sup>70</sup> In his allegorical exegesis of *Exod* 33:20–23,<sup>71</sup> where God says to Moses that he will be unable to see his face, but only his back, Gregory, like Philo, refers this passage to God's hiddenness, but follows Philo through Origen's filter. Gregory observes that this episode has no literal, but only allegorical, meaning, because God's incorporeality was a tenet of Platonism and excluded ideas such as "God's back." Gregory's argument and terminology depend on Origen's aforementioned theory of Biblical allegoresis in *Princ.* IV, where absurdities and impossibilities at the literal level are said to point to the necessity of allegoresis. Divine anthropomorphisms such as "God's back" are exactly the kind of absurdity that Origen adduced.

Gregory, like Origen, considers *CantC* a mystagogy, which "mystically elevates [μυσταγωγεί] the mind into the divine secrets" (*H.Cant.* 1, GNO 6, 22, 16). In *Homily* 12, Gregory insists that the divinity "always turns out to be beyond any impression that can reveal it," and is "always superior to the indication suggested by the names' meanings." For Gregory, as for Philo, by means of names we can only say "how God is" and not "what God is" (*Abl.*, GNO 3/1, 56). The Divinity "is denominated with different appellatives which refer to its manifold activities" (*CE* I 315; cf. *Beat.*, GNO 7/2, 141).

Love, ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ (as a strong form of ἀγάπη) bring about the mystical ascent to God. Gregory also indicated virginity as a factor of the mystical ascent to God: virginity "deifies [θεοποιούσαν] those who share in her pure mysteries" (*Virg.* 1). There is no contradiction between love and virginity both producing the mystical ascent to God, since the love Gregory is speaking of is spiritual, and virginity is typical of God, meaning essentially purity and abstention from any evil, so that by imitating it one ascends mystically towards God.

Gregory's apophatic mysticism culminated in restoration and deification (θέωσις), as in Origen, although Gregory in the whole of his work employs θέωσις terminology rarely, only twice θεοποιέω and twice συναποθεώω, a neologism.<sup>72</sup> *H.Cant.* 15, a late work, refers to mystical eschatology often, links it to apokatastasis. The conclusion of

<sup>68</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *VM* I 47; II 110.

<sup>69</sup> Origenes, *CC* VI 17; *C.Io.* II 172, etc.

<sup>70</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, "Philosophical Allegoresis," 55–99.

<sup>71</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *VM* II 219–255.

<sup>72</sup> On Gregory's deification theory see Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 225–232.

this homily is entirely devoted to the description of apokatastasis, after the vanishing of evilness from all and the attainment of mystical communion with God-the Good. First Gregory remarks, in accord with Paul and Origen, that “God receives everyone in his order, giving to each one in proportion to his merits”—the classical definition of justice. God’s justice, however, does not contradict God’s love, as results from *Or. cat.* 26. Gregory quotes Rom 8:35, 38–39 concerning God’s unfailing love: “Nobody will ever be able to separate us from God’s love,” and continues to highlight the unifying effects of love: “But if, as is written, love will utterly dispel fear [1 John 4:18], and fear, by transforming itself, will become love, then it will be found that what is saved constitutes a *unity* [μονὰς τὸ σωζόμενον], since all will be *unified* with one another [πάντων ἀλλήλοις ἐνωθέντων], in connaturality with the only Good [ἐν τῇ πρὸς τὸ μόνον ἀγαθὸν συμφυΐα], thanks to perfection” (GNO 6, 466–467). This final ἔνωσις is one of the most important traits of mystical eschatology in Gregory, as in Origen, and will involve all rational creatures, as is explained immediately afterwards: “The run for this beatitude is common to *all the souls* of every order...until all look at *the same object of their desire and become one and the same thing* and no evilness [κακία] will any longer remain in anyone. Then God will really be ‘all in all.’” (1 Cor 15:28).

## Pseudo-Dionysius

Mystical and apophatic theology, metaphysically based on the ontological transcendence of the divinity—a tenet of the whole Platonic tradition—is typical of Origen, Nyssen, and Dionysius, who was a refined knower of both (and of Plotinus).<sup>73</sup> The divinity, in its essence, is unknowable because of its transcendence. We can know that God is, but not what God is (this tenet, common to Philo and several Christian thinkers, was still expressed by Eriugena, *Periph.* IV 771CD: God is incomprehensible to any intellect;<sup>74</sup> human mind can know that God is, but not what God is). Hence the necessity of mystical, apophatic theology.

The apophatic mysticism of love, already developed by Origen and Gregory, is a central element in the mystical theology of Dionysius. He knew Gregory’s definition of God as beauty and beautiful, and repeatedly called God “beautiful and good,” as the motivation of all things’ desire and love of God (*DN* 4, 10, 708A; 4, 7, 701C; 704AB).<sup>75</sup> Dionysius found the connection between the desire for God-the Good

<sup>73</sup> Argument in Ramelli, “The Divine as Inaccessible Object.”

<sup>74</sup> No substance or essence, of any visible or invisible creature, is comprehensible to intellect, a fortiori that of God. Eriugena ascribed this tenet to “Gregory the theologian” (441B).

<sup>75</sup> Other occurrences of “beautiful and good” are in Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 4, 7, 704B; 4, 8, 704D; 4, 10, 705C–708A; 4, 18, 713D.

and reversion (ἐπιστροφή), the third Platonic metaphysical movement, in Proclus (*ET* 31: all things desire the Good and revert to it), but also in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, and applied this connection to apokatastasis.<sup>76</sup> Dionysius takes over, as ever, both traditions (‘pagan’ and Christian Platonism): “Every being is from the Beautiful and the Good, and in the Beautiful and the Good, and is reverted to the Beautiful and Good” (*DN* 4, 10, 705C) and takes over the very nexus between love/desire and reversion: the Good is what all beings desire, and to which all beings revert (*DN* 4, 4,700B). The strong link between love, God as Beautiful and Good, and reversion is hammered home in *DN* 4, 12, 709D: “Love is a power that unifies, connects, and distributively combines; it preexists in the Beautiful and the Good, through the Beautiful and the Good, and is given out from the Beautiful and the Good through the beautiful and the Good... it moves the first beings to providence and establishes the reversion of the more needy towards their superiors.”

We shall see that sometimes Dionysius explicitly assimilates ἐπιστροφή and ἀποκατάστασις or restoration, using the terminology of both in the same text, and that he, with Origen and Nyssen, refers love as ἔρωσ to God.

Dionysius built on Origen’s and Gregory’s theologies of mysticism and love, as well as on those by Plotinus and especially Proclus. Proclus attributed love to the gods and even anticipated Dionysius’ link between love and reversion (ἐπιστροφή): the superior gods love the inferior providentially, and the inferior the superior revertively (ἐπιστρεπτικῶς, *In Alc.* 55–56). This theory, in turn, is likely to come from Origen, but I shall not investigate here Origen’s influence on Proclus.<sup>77</sup> What is important to note in this connection is that, unlike Proclus, Dionysius (I think qua *Christian* Platonist) ascribes love to the supreme deity, the One, not only to the inferior gods. In this respect, he is again at one with Origen’s Christian Platonism and departs from Plotinus’ Neoplatonism.

Dionysius is a Christian Neoplatonist who relied heavily on Proclus, especially his *Platonic Theology*.<sup>78</sup> This probably was one of the last works by Proclus, which was not read outside the inner circle of the Athenian Platonic school for a while.<sup>79</sup> This is why Dionysius might have belonged to Proclus’ school, or have been closely connected to it, although it is unnecessary to suppose that he was a “pagan.”<sup>80</sup> Dionysius was acquainted both with Plotinus’ noble *erōs* in *Enn.* VI 9, 9, 35 and with the use of *erōs* in Proclus, who posited both a providential *erōs* of the superior towards the inferior

<sup>76</sup> See Ramelli, “The Question of Origen’s Conversion,” 61–108.

<sup>77</sup> I pointed to some examples in Ramelli, “Origen to Evagrius,” 271–291.

<sup>78</sup> Some of the chapter headings of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, lacking in the extant Greek, in the Syriac version of Sergius of Reshaina seem to coincide with the chapter headings of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*: Perczel, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*,” 498–499.

<sup>79</sup> Lankila, “The Corpus Areopagiticum”; Perczel, “Dionysius the Areopagite,” 214–215.

<sup>80</sup> Mainoldi, *Dietro Dionigi l’Areopagita*, 486–503, identifies the main author of the *Corpus*—a collective work—with an Athenian “pagan” Neoplatonist who converted to Christianity.

and an anagogic *erōs* of the inferior towards the superior. Proclus envisaged anagogic *erōs* in master-disciple relationships.<sup>81</sup> The master had to reorient desire (*erōs*) from sensible to intelligible beauty and help the disciple to become like the divinity and attain union with it. Anagogic *erōs* was thus a form of pedagogy. Now, for Origen it was in my view divine pedagogy, as is clear from the Commentary on CantC. The matter is the Logos, who is the divine Lover and Beloved. The *First Alcibiades*, according to Proclus, is concerned with the proper orientation of *erōs*, the gift of love that leads the perfectly loving souls (ἔρωτικάι ψυχαί) to union with the real and truly existent beauty and to the avoidance of misguided *erōs* that falls all over the images of what is beautiful, on account of ignorance of true beauty. Socrates' love is providential, related to the form of the Good, and anagogic, as it lifts souls up (ἀναγωγός, *In Alc.* 45, 5). In Proclus' Commentary on *Alcibiades I*, anagogic *erōs* is "the cause of reversion (ἐπιστροφή) to the divine beauty, which...elevates (ἀνάγουσα) all things that come second." Reversion is connected with apokatastasis in Proclus and Dionysius (as anticipated by Origen), and both relate to anagogic love. Proclus calls this dialogue a "science of love" (*In Alc.* 27; 28; 30) because it transforms the recipient into a "lover of the care for the self" (ἐραστήν ἑαυτοῦ προνοίας, 27, 11). Proclus explains that "by turning Alcibiades towards himself, Socrates guides him up (ἀνάγει) to the contemplation of Socratic knowledge" (ἐπιστήμη, *In Alcib.* 19, 17–18).

Both Proclus' concept of love and especially Origen's and Nyssen's exegesis of *CantC* influenced Dionysius' concept of love within the framework of his mystical theology. As Paul was the model of ecstasy and epektasis for Gregory, so too is he for Dionysius, and that on account of love. Dionysius calls Paul "the great lover," who suffers ecstasy for God (2 Cor 5:13) and withdraws, to make room for Christ (Gal 2:20; *DN* 4, 13). Origen also inspired Dionysius with the core notion of the perfect who "no longer lives, but Christ lives in her" (Gal 2:20), in *C.To.* IV 23, in his ideal of the perfect who "becomes Christ," so as to be Mary's child (John 19:26).

By referring to "theologians," Dionysius, may mean Origen's tradition, including Nyssen; Hierotheus, his revered teacher,<sup>82</sup> might point to Origen.<sup>83</sup> In *DN* 2, 11, Paul is represented as a "common guide" of both Dionysius and his "instructor" Hierotheus; likewise, in *DN* 3, 2, Hierotheus is Dionysius' inspirer after "the divine Paul." Since Paul was Origen's hero and inspired his doctrine of apokatastasis, that of love, Christology, and much else, this seems to support the hypothesis that Hierotheus may point to Origen (possibly at the same time as it points to Proclus, with the double system of references to both 'pagan' and Christian Platonism typical of Dionysius). Hierotheus, qua pseudonym, is not included in the list of objections to

<sup>81</sup> On which see Markus, "Anagogic Love," 1–39.

<sup>82</sup> Dionysius is simply explicating in his own works Hierotheus' "synoptic" teaching directed to initiated (*DN* 3, 2–3, as did Clement with Pantaenus, and Plotinus with Ammonius).

<sup>83</sup> As I suggested in Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, 694–700.



the identification of the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* with the Dionysius converted by Paul in sixth-century presbyter Theodore's *The Book of St. Dionysius Is Authentic*.<sup>84</sup> Dionysius' reference to Hierotheus as a contemporary of the apostles fits well within his pseudonymity strategy, which comprises the choice of a name that refers to the Athenian philosopher converted by Paul after his Areopagus speech. Hierotheus appears in the title of Bar Sudhaili's pantheistic *Book of the Holy Hierotheus* and is presented by Dionysius as his own teacher, a contemporary of the apostles. He is described by Dionysius as superior to all other Christian sages after the apostles (DN 3, 2). Such a description echoes Didymus' and Jerome's definition of Origen. Hierotheus is a sublime theologian and mystic, παθῶν τὰ θεῖα, whose writings are a "second Scripture": this also suits well Origen's inspired exegesis (and perhaps his *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν*, which was commented on by Didymus like a second Scripture).

Dionysius quotes two excerpts, from Hierotheus' *Elements of Theology* (Θεολογικαὶ στοιχειώσεις)—a pendant to Dionysius' own *Outlines of Theology* (Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις)—and *Hymns on Love* (DN 2, 9–10; 4, 15–17). These Ἐρωτικοὶ ὕμνοι may refer to Origen's Commentary on *CantC*, which Dionysius knew, and the Θεολογικαὶ στοιχειώσεις to Origen's *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* or the whole of his theological work, although, with Dionysius' usual double-reference scheme to 'pagan' and Christian Platonism together, the 'pagan' side was represented by Proclus' *Στοιχείωσις θεολογική* and his *Hymns*. My supposition that the *Hymns on Love* may conceal an allusion to Origen's commentary on *CantC* is supported by the expression κατὰ τοὺς ἐρωτικούς ὕμνους (DN 4, 14, 713A, suggesting not the Canticles, but a commentary on it) and by the fact that Origen's commentary had become the most authoritative interpretation of Canticles. Jerome in his prologue to his translation of Origen's homilies on *CantC* confirms this: "Origen in his other works surpassed all other writers, but in the Song of Songs he surpassed himself" with his commentary: "so, it appears that it is in Origen that Scripture was fulfilled, 'The king has led me into his chamber.'"

DN 2, 9–10, the first excerpt from Hierotheus, deals with Christ-Logos, who maintains the harmony of parts and whole, being above both, in terms that strongly resemble Clement's and Origen's theology. The second excerpt, 4, 15–17, expounds the gradation of love, whose forms and powers are reduced to unity: the Neoplatonic motif culminates in the Christian principle of God-ἀγάπη. Love is a unifying force that moves all,<sup>85</sup> from the Good to the last being and from this to the Good. This, as we shall see, may conceal a reference to Origen's Commentary on *CantC*.

<sup>84</sup> Photius, *Bibl. Cod.* 1,1a–2a, Bekker. This lost work refuted four objections to the authenticity: both Eusebius and other Fathers never cite the *Corpus*; the *Corpus* expounds traditions that have developed progressively inside the Church; the author cites Ignatius who lived after Dionysius.

<sup>85</sup> Sassi, "Mystical Union," 771–784.

Dionysius drew on Origen's and Nyssen's apophatic, mystical theology.<sup>86</sup> There are even verbal borrowings from Gregory<sup>87</sup> and Origen, for instance *μονὰς καὶ ἑνὰς* (*DN* 1, 4, from *Princ.* I 1, 6). Dionysius' embrace of *apokatastasis*,<sup>88</sup> related to *ἐπιστροφή*, further links him to Origen and Gregory (like the concept of *anastasis* as *apokatastasis* in *TM* 7, 9, Ritter 130, which is typical of Nyssen and is rooted in Origen<sup>89</sup>). Following in Origen's footsteps, Dionysius assimilated the Neoplatonic movement of *ἐπιστροφή*, after *μονή* and *πρόδος*, with *ἀποκατάστασις*, at least in *EH* 82, 17 and 83, 7, even to the point of using, for *ἐπιστροφή*, the very terminology of *apokatastasis*.<sup>90</sup> *Apokatastasis* is the return to the Monad and unification (*εἰς τὴν οἰκείαν μονάδα συνάγεται καὶ ἐνοποιεῖ τοὺς ἐπ' αὐτὴν ἱερῶς ἀναγομένους*); the application of the terminology of *οἰκείωσις* to the notion of *apokatastasis* is a legacy of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.

In the third passage from Hierotheus, who might conceal Origen, the metaphysical movement of *ἐπιστροφή* (*εἰς τάγαθὸν ἐπιστρεφομένην*), after that of *πρόδος* (*ἀγαθὴν πρόδον*), is identified with *ἀποκατάστασις* (*DN* 4, 14, [Suchla 160, 15]). Indeed, *apokatastasis* terminology is directly employed for *ἐπιστροφή*: God's love moves in a circle that proceeds from the Good—for God is “Beauty and Good itself,” as in Nyssen<sup>91</sup>—and returns to the Good; it “always proceeds, remains, and returns [*ἀποκαθιστάμενος*] to the same Good.” (This idea will be taken over, in the same image of the eternal circle, by the Christian Platonist Eriugena, another Origenian, who also conflated reversal or *reditus*, the Latin translation of *ἐπιστροφή*, with *apokatastasis*: true Goodness diffuses “from itself, into itself, and back to itself,” *Periph.* III 632D).<sup>92</sup> Dionysius directly calls *ἐπιστροφή* *apokatastasis*, clearly identifying both. Dionysius ascribes this doctrine to Hierotheus (Origen? Perhaps Origen and Proclus at the same time?):

The only one who is Beauty and Good per se [*μόνον αὐτὸ δι' ἑαυτὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν*]<sup>93</sup> is the manifestation, so to say, of itself through itself, the good procession [*πρόδον*] of the transcendent unity, and simple movement of love, self-moving, self-operating, proceeding in the Good and gushing out from the Good to the beings and returning again to the Good [*αὐθὶς εἰς τάγαθὸν ἐπιστρεφομένην*]. In this the divine love exceptionally clearly shows *its own lack of an end and a beginning* [*τὸ ἀτελεύτητον ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἄναρχον ὁ θεῖος*

<sup>86</sup> Ramelli, “The Divine.”

<sup>87</sup> E.g. the neologism *θεοπλαστία*, Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 2, 9, from Nyssen, *θεόπλαστος*, *H.Eccl.*, GNO 5, 336.

<sup>88</sup> See Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, 694–721.

<sup>89</sup> See Ramelli, “Christian Soteriology,” 313–356.

<sup>90</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, “Origen, Evagrius, and Dionysius” (also some arguments in Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*).

<sup>91</sup> Ramelli, “Good / Beauty”; trans. Ziakas, “Τὸ ὁμορφο.”

<sup>92</sup> See Ramelli, “The Question of Origen's Conversion.”

<sup>93</sup> Note the influence of Gregory of Nyssa about God as Beauty and Good.

ἔρωος], like a kind of infinite<sup>94</sup> and absolutely eternal circle for the Good, from the Good, in the Good, and towards the Good [τις αἰδιος κύκλος διὰ τάγαθόν, ἐκ τάγαθοῦ καὶ ἐν τάγαθῷ καὶ εἰς τάγαθόν], proceeding around in an introversive non-wandering spiral, always proceeding, remaining, and returning [ἀποκαθιστάμενος, being restored] in the same movement and way [κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ προΐων αἰεὶ καὶ μένων καὶ ἀποκαθιστάμενος]. These truths were also explained, in his divinely inspired exegesis [ἐνθῆως ὑφηγήσατο], by my illustrious and holy initiator in the / according to the *Hymns on Love* [κατὰ τοὺς ἐρωτικούς ὕμνους]. It will be particularly appropriate to quote from these Hymns and thus provide my own discourse on love with a sacred introduction, as it were: “Love [τὸν ἔρωτα], be it divine or angelic or intellectual or psychic or physical, should be understood as a unitive and commingling force that gathers together [ἐνωτικὴν τινα καὶ συγκρατικὴν ἐννοήσωμεν δύναμιν] and induces the superior to provide for the inferior, the peer to be in communion with the peer, and the inferior to revert to the superior...”<sup>95</sup>

God’s love forms a circle that proceeds from the Good and returns to the Good. The use of apokatastasis terminology, surely on purpose, in place of ἐπιστροφή-reversal terminology, may be intended as a double reference scheme, ‘pagan’ and Christian, although in the time of Dionysius both terminologies were used in ‘pagan’ and Christian Platonism together.

The inspired exegete who expounded this theory, Hierotheus, probably points to both Proclus, the author of Hymns (who used the similar expression “circle without beginning or end”),<sup>96</sup> and, on the Christian side, Origen, primarily in his commentary on *CantC*. Indeed, it is clear that Dionysius is paraphrasing the initial sections of this commentary (he paraphrases Origen also elsewhere),<sup>97</sup> and “divinely inspired exegesis” describes well Origen’s exegesis, and particularly his Commentary on *CantC*. That this master/initiator is Origen is suggested by the connection between love, unity, and reversion/restoration. The ἐρωτικοὶ ὕμνοι may therefore be Origen’s commentary, where Origen used both ἔρωος—reworking its Platonic meaning—and ἀγάπη to refer to God’s love, and, like Hierotheus, conceived it as a unifying power. For example, in prol. 2, 16 he insisted that besides *carnalis amor/cupido* one should admit of *spiritalis amor* (ἔρωος), relevant to the *interior homo*. Dionysius is likely to have had in mind Origen and Nyssen, when noting that “the theologians regarded eros and agape as having the same meaning” and thus treated ἀγάπη and ἔρωος as synonyms. This is what Origen and Gregory did. But this real ἔρωος, which is appropriate to God, must be carefully distinguished from the divided, physical, and partial

<sup>94</sup> Note again the influence of Gregory of Nyssa about God as infinite.

<sup>95</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 4, 14, 712C–713AB (Suchla 160, 15).

<sup>96</sup> *Inst. theol.* 146 = Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 4, 14, 712D: the divine love has neither beginning nor end (ἀτελεύτητον καὶ ἀναρχον), like “an eternal [αἰδιον] circle.”

<sup>97</sup> At the beginning of *DN* 2, Dionysius paraphrases Origenes, *Princ.* I 2, 13; further examples below, including Ignatius.

ἔρωσ, which is not true ἔρωσ, but an empty image therefor (*DN* 4, 12, 709BC). This is the same distinction as Origen had posited.

That Dionysius is referring to Origen, and Gregory, is confirmed when in *DN* 4, 12, 709B he remarks that some of the Christian writers on sacred matters have regarded the title ἔρωσ as even more divine than ἀγάπη. Gregory claimed that ἔρωσ is a more intense form of ἀγάπη (*H.Cant.* 13, GNO 6, 383, 9). Not only the application of ἔρωσ to God, in mystical theology, but also apokatastasis can be ascribed to Origen as “Hierotheus.” Origen and Gregory were among the theologians cited as authorities by Dionysius. Indeed, Origen’s influence regarding the concept of divine love as ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ is also evident in Patristic thinkers who followed him, not only Nyssen, but also Methodius.<sup>98</sup>

This is why Dionysius ascribes ἔρωσ to God in *DN* 4, 10: “the cause of all beings, by excess of goodness, loves [ἐρᾷ] all beings, creates all beings, perfects all beings, sustains all beings, and reverts all beings” (*DN* 4, 10, 708AB). Dionysius links once again love-desire to the movement of reversion-apokatastasis. His insistence on the “ecstatic” excess of God’s love as the cause of all beings (*DN* 4, 13, 712AB: “going out of himself,” “excess of erotic goodness,” etc.) and their ecstatic return comes—with Dionysius’ usual double reference, ‘pagan’ and Christian—from Proclus’ idea of excess, περιουσία, as the cause of all beings (*ET* 27), but at the same time echoes Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of *epektasis* in the return to God: going out of oneself in search of God.

Also, Dionysius cites Ignatius: ὁ ἔρωσ μου ἐσταύρωται, “my love has been crucified,” in order to justify his own application of ἔρωσ to divine love in *DN* 4, 12. Now, with this move Dionysius is repeating Origen’s one in his commentary on *CantC*: “Non ergo interest utrum amari [ἐρᾶσθαι] dicatur Deus aut diligī [ἀγαπᾶσθαι], nec puto quod culpari possit si quis Deum, sicut Iohannes caritatem [ἀγάπη], ita ipse amorem [ἔρωσ] nominet. Denique memini aliquem sanctorum dixisse, Ignatium nomine, de Christo: Meus autem amor [ἔρωσ] crucifixus est” (prol. 2, 36). Origen used ἔρωσ—reworking its Platonic meaning—besides ἀγάπη to refer to God’s love, as mentioned, and conceived it as a unifying force, as Hierotheus did according to Dionysius.<sup>99</sup>

In *Theologia mystica* Dionysius also takes over Origen’s mystical exegesis, connecting the darkness with the absence of words and thought (ἄλογία, ἀνοησία) and silence (*TM* 3, 103BC), on which Nyssen already insisted in his apophaticism. For “the one who is above all being, also transcends all knowledge” (*DN* 1, 4, 593A), so “the union” with God can only be “above intellect” (*DN* 7, 3, 872B), therefore mystical, and implies the “cessation of intellectual activities” (*DN* 2, 4, 592D), but God even transcends ineffability and unknowing, being ὑπεράρρητος, ὑπεράγνωστος

<sup>98</sup> Ramelli, “Love.”

<sup>99</sup> See Ramelli, “Origen and Evagrius” and Tolan, “Ὁ Θεὸς ἔρωσ ἐστίν.”

(DN 1, 4, 592B). In *TM* 1, 3, 1001A, Dionysius explicitly mentions the “darkness of unknowing.” In at least four passages, Dionysius quotes Plotinus (ἄφελε πάντα with a view to the union with the One), who inspired Nyssen as well on this score.<sup>100</sup> Dionysius, like Origen and Nyssen, claimed that God’s essence is inaccessible, but humans can know something about God through God’s operations, names, and powers. Divine names, explored in a specific work, *De divinis nominibus*, name the nameless, reflecting not the essence, but the creative powers of God.

Dionysius, as seen, quotes two excerpts allegedly from works by Hierotheus, his teacher: *Elements of Theology* and *Hymns on Love*, which may allude to Origen’s works, besides those of Proclus, in the usual double reference scheme. Declaredly the disciple of Hierotheus and the Athenian convert of St. Paul, Dionysius, a Christian Neoplatonist, is probably an *Origenian*—not a radically Origenistic—Platonist. Origen and Nyssen influenced him, including in the theory of love and ascent and that of apokatastasis–deification.

Many hints suggest that he supported the theory of apokatastasis in his preserved and his purportedly lost works, which may be lost indeed, or preserved under a different name and author, or which he may have mentioned without ever having written them. In the adhesion to this theory, he followed Clement, Origen, Nyssen, Evagrius, and Neoplatonism, from which he inherited the μονή-πρόοδος-ἐπιστροφή scheme. As argued, he directly used the terminology of apokatastasis for the third Neoplatonic movement. Dionysius also shared with the above thinkers the metaphysical tenet of the ontological non-subsistence of evil: a pillar of the doctrine of restoration. Apokatastasis for Dionysius, just as for Eriugena afterwards (who read Dionysius with the scholia of John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor),<sup>101</sup> but also for Proclus,<sup>102</sup> is related to ἐπιστροφή, the third Neoplatonic movement, the return of all beings to their Cause: “The Cause of All is ‘all in all,’ according to the saying [τὸ λόγιον],<sup>103</sup> and certainly it must be praised in that it is the Giver of existence to all, the Originator of all beings, *who brings all to perfection* [τελειωτική], holding them together and protecting them; their seat, which *has them all revert to itself* [πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἐπιστρεπτική], and this in a unified, *irresistible* and absolute [ἀσχετως], and transcendent way” (DN 1, 7, 596c–597a).

<sup>100</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* V 3 [49] 17, 39; cf. VI 7, 36; VI 8, 21; Ramelli, “Mysticism and Mystic Apophaticism.” The verbal form appears in *Theologia Mystica* (1, 1, 1001A: πάντα ἀφελών and 2, 1, 1025B: τὰ πάντα ἀφαιρούμεν); the nominal form in Dionysius Areopagita, DN II 4, 641A: ἡ πάντων ἀφαιρέσις, and I 5, 593C: τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων ἀφαιρέσεως.

<sup>101</sup> See Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, the section on Eriugena.

<sup>102</sup> As I have argued in Ramelli, “Some Overlooked Sources.”

<sup>103</sup> On the one side it is a Biblical saying, 1 Cor 15:28, Origen’s favourite passage in support of the doctrine of apokatastasis; on the other side, it is a neoplatonic tenet: see Ramelli, “Some Overlooked Sources.” Τὸ λόγιον, “sacred utterance,” was also used in the sense of an “oracular response/utterance”; by the fifth century, τὰ λόγια came to be used to describe the *Oracula Chaldaica*. Addey, *Divination and Theurgy*, 7.

Again, Dionysius insists that God is “the Cause of the *perfecting* [τελείωσις] of all beings [...] it has pre-taken in itself all beings with the perfect acts of goodness of its *providence*, which is the cause of all.” That all beings are brought to perfection by God, that they will all return to God, and that God’s goodness and providence are the cause of all, probably also with an allusion to exemplarism (Gd “has pre-taken in itself all beings”), is surely coherent with the theory of apokatastasis. Dionysius also speaks of the eschatological παλιγγενεσία (EH 7, 1, 1, 3; 7, 3, 1), using what was originally a Stoic term, which later Christian sources connected with apokatastasis.<sup>104</sup>

Dionysius may have alluded allegorically to the eventual restoration, by deploying the astronomical meaning of ἀποκατάστασις, as Evagrius had done.<sup>105</sup> In *De divinis nominibus*, the astronomical allegory is as follows: the return of heavenly bodies is decided by God, the Good, and the light of the sun is the symbol of the Good, with a reminiscence of Plato, but also of Origen’s insistence on Christ–God as the Sun of Justice. In the light of this symbolic interpretation of astronomical apokatastasis, this may well be the symbol of the general restoration, this also provided by God.<sup>106</sup> If the sun represents the Good/God, the heavenly bodies can symbolise the rational creatures who participate in the Good.

Another passage of the same work describes God’s power that proceeds down to all beings, preserves them by leading them to their own good, keeps angels uncontaminated, orders the apokatastasis of heavenly bodies, and offers deification as a gift, providing the relevant capacity to those who will be deified (ἐκθεούμενοι).<sup>107</sup> The link between apokatastasis and θέωσις goes back to Origen. In Dionysius’ passage, astronomical apokatastasis can symbolise again the restoration of rational creatures, all the more in that it is mentioned between the idea of the angels, who are preserved uncontaminated, and that of the deification (θέωσις) of rational creatures (see also EH 1).

Under the name of “Hierotheus,” Dionysius is likely to have attributed to Origen not only the application of ἔρωσις to God, as seen, but also apokatastasis, and the connection between love and apokatastasis (in DN 4, 14, 712C–713AB), which is also

<sup>104</sup> See Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, introduction. Work on ancient philosophical concepts of apokatastasis is underway.

<sup>105</sup> As I argued Ramelli, “Harmony.”

<sup>106</sup> Τῶν οὐρανίων ἀρχῶν καὶ ἀποπερατώσεων αἰτία τὰγαθόν [...] τῆς παμμεγέθους οὐρανοπορίας κινήσεων καὶ τῶν ἀστρῶν τάξεων [...] καὶ τῆς τῶν δύο φωστήρων, οὓς τὰ λόγια καλεῖ μεγάλους, ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν εἰς τὰ αὐτὰ περιοδικῆς ἀποκαταστάσεως [...] Τί ἂν τις φαίη περὶ αὐτῆς καθ’ αὐτὴν τῆς ἡλιακῆς ἀκτίνας; Ἐκ τὰγαθοῦ γὰρ τὸ φῶς καὶ εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος (Suchla 146.19).

<sup>107</sup> Suchla 202, 14: Πρόεισι δὲ τὰ τῆς ἀνεκλείπτου δυνάμεως καὶ εἰς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ζῶα καὶ φυτὰ καὶ τὴν ὅλην τοῦ παντός φύσιν [...] καὶ τὰς τοῦ παντός τάξεις καὶ εὐθημοσύνας εἰς τὸ οἰκεῖον ἀγαθὸν διασώζει καὶ τὰς ἀθανάτους τῶν ἀγγελικῶν ἐνάδων ζωὰς ἀλωβήτους διαφυλάττει καὶ τὰς οὐρανιας καὶ φωστηρικὰς καὶ ἀστρῶν οὐσίας καὶ τάξεις ἀναλωίωτους καὶ τὸν αἰῶνα δύνασθαι εἶναι ποιεῖ καὶ τὰς τοῦ χρόνου περιελίξεις διακρίνει μὲν ταῖς προόδοις, συνάγει δὲ ταῖς ἀποκαταστάσεσι [...] καὶ τὴν τοῦ παντός ἀδιάλυτον μονὴν ἀσφαλιζέται καὶ τὴν θέωσιν αὐτὴν δωρεῖται δύναμιν εἰς τοῦτο τοῖς ἐκθεουμένοις παρέχουσα. On deification in Dionysius, e.g. De Andia, *Henosis*.

Origen's strategy.<sup>108</sup> Dionysius joins love and apokatastasis in *DN* 4, 10, 708AB. He describes God (Beauty and Good) as ἔραστόν and ἀγαπητόν and declares that "the Cause of all beings loves all beings in the superabundance of its goodness," because of which God creates all, perfects all, keeps all together, and restores all. Divine love is called θεῖος ἔρωσ and the "endless circle" of ἔρωσ (*DN* 4, 14–15, 712D–713AB) moves "t'rough the Good, from the Good, in the Good, and to the Good" in a movement of μονή–πρόοδος–ἐπιστροφή that becomes μονή–πρόοδος–ἀποκατάστασις, through the substitution of ἐπιστροφή with ἀποκατάστασις in this passage: "always proceeding, remaining, and *being restored* [instead of: *reverting*] to itself." Here, Dionysius introduces Hierotheus' definition of love-Eros, as seen. The connection between love, unity, and reversion/restoration further points to the identification of Hierotheus with Origen.

Ἀγάπη towards God is the aim of all hierarchy (*EH* 1, 3, 376A). Dionysius uses many terms related to hierarchy: ἱεραρχία, κυριαρχία (*CH* 8, 1, 240B), ἐναρχία (*DN* 2, 4, 641A etc.), οὐσιαρχία (*DN* 5, 1, 816B etc.), ἐξουσιαρχία, ἀγαθαρχία (*DN* 1, 5, 593C; 3, 1, 680B, etc.), and θεαρχία, Thearchy. Dionysius' neologism, θεαρχία, the divine unity of the three hypostases of the Trinity who are the three ἀρχαί or principles of all, comes, I suspect, from Origen's *Περὶ ἀρχῶν*, where the ἀρχαί are the three hypostases of the Trinity. Origen even influenced Porphyry's choice of entitling a treatise of Plotinus *περὶ τῶν τριῶν ἀρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων*, *The Three Principal Hypostases*<sup>109</sup> or the three Hypostases that are the ἀρχαί. God produces "the ἀρχαί of beings," "every being owing its ἀρχή to God" (*DN* 5, 6; 4, 28): these ἀρχαί participate in God (*DN* 5, 5; cf. 4, 4). Dionysius repeatedly calls God θεαρχικὴ ἀγαθότης in *MT* 7, 4: this combines ἀγαθαρχία, "the principle that is Good," and θεαρχία, "the Principle that is God." In Dionysius, indeed, the Trinity is both θεαρχία and θεαρχικὴ ἀγαθότης, expressions that were likely inspired by Origen's God as three ἀρχαί or ἀρχικὴ τριάς and God as supreme ἀγαθότης.<sup>110</sup> The very title *Περὶ ἀρχῶν*, which referred to God in Origen and had a long philosophical history,<sup>111</sup> was also the title of Damascius' treatise, probably also known to "Dionysius." Dionysius' ὑπεράρχιος ἀρχή (*DN* 1, 3, 589C, *CH* 1, 2, 121B, etc.) may even refer to Damascius' idea of a principle before the principle.

Another characterisation of God, "Monad and Henad" (*DN* 1, 4). derives from Origen (*Princ.* I 1, 6), as suggested, or maybe from both Origen and Proclus, with Dionysius' usual system of "double reference" to 'pagan' and Christian Platonism together. Proclus places Monad and Henad on the same plane only seldom, and never in reference to the First Principle, whereas Origen in *Princ.* I 1, 6 defines God

<sup>108</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, "Mystical Theology in Evagrius."

<sup>109</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and Hypostasis," 302–350.

<sup>110</sup> Demonstration in Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and Hypostasis."

<sup>111</sup> I analyzed it in Ramelli, "Origen, Patristic Philosophy."

precisely as μονάς and ἐνός; the Greek is preserved by Rufinus in his translation. Origen also designated as Henad the union of the Father and the Son (*Dial. Her.* 4, 4). Dionysius' Origenian passage on God–Monad–Henad develops the doctrine of apokatastasis as restoration to unity and to God's image and likeness, just as Origen and Nyssen had conceived apokatastasis. Dionysius here telescopes Origen's stages of image>likeness>unity.<sup>112</sup>

You will find, so to say, that the whole *hymnology of the theologians* prepares the *divine names* in a revelatory and hymnic way, according to the beneficent *procession of the principle of the Divinity*. For this reason, virtually *in the whole theological doctrine* we see the principle of the Divinity celebrated as *Monad and Henad* [μονάς καὶ ἐνός], because of the simplicity and unity of its supernatural indivisibility, by which *we are unified as by a unifying power*, and by a *supermundane act of reunion of our divisible alterities*, *we are assembled in a monad that is an image of God* (θεοειδής) *and in a union that is in the likeness of God* (θεομίμητος, DN 1, 4).

Note that the Biblical notions of εἰκών and ὁμοίωσις are expressed here by “pagan” synonyms: θεοειδής, θεομίμητος, with Dionysius' usual strategy of double reference to both “pagan” and Christian Platonism.

Dionysius here speaks in the present of God's activities of reunion, unification, and making creatures a monad as image and likeness of God, as he does oftentimes, and not in the future, because God is adiastatic, as Origen and Gregory Nyssen taught, and therefore above time: God is “the eternity of things that are, the time of things that come to be” and “transcends both time and eternity and all things in time and eternity” (DN 5, 4, 817C; 5, 10, 825B). God, being eternal, needs the use of the present or imperfect—as in John 1:1. This use of the present can mislead scholars into believing that Dionysius did not support apokatastasis. Dionysius, in fact, stresses that God is the Eternal, from which all times derive, just as God is beyond Being, and the source of all being (as Origen taught); the Godhead is ancient and young not because it is in time, but because it exists from the beginning and never gets old (DN 10).

In the block quote from DN 1, 4, “divine names” may refer, not only to Porphyry's homonymous work *Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων*,<sup>113</sup> but also to Origen's systematic study of Christ's *epinoiai* in his *Commentary on John*, according again to the double reference scheme typical of Dionysius. Indeed, Dionysius declares to have drawn his divine names from Scripture (DN 1, 8, 597B). This is what Origen and Gregory did in their study of divine *epinoiai*. Dionysius seems to follow Gregory in identifying not only the Father, but all the three Persons of the Trinity, with the Platonic

<sup>112</sup> See Ramelli, “Harmony,” 1–49.

<sup>113</sup> This reference is also suggested by Mainoldi, *Dietro Dionigi l'Areopagita*, 424.



One or Good. Therefore, not only the Father, but also the Son is beyond Being (ὑπερούσιος, *MT* 1, 1).

As several points suggest, *DN* 1, 4 follows in Origen's footsteps: especially the notion of "the hymnology of the theologians," God described as "Monad and Henad," and the allusion to apokatastasis as unity. In *Princ.* II 1, 1 Origen calls *unitas*-ένάς also the original unity of creation (a notion developed by Evagrius), and in the Dionysian passage the unity of the Henad is applied precisely to the original unity, restored in the eventual apokatastasis, according to the assimilation of ἀρχή and τέλος which is reflected in the circular movement of μονή-πρόοδος-ἐπιστροφή.

Dionysius affirms that he had written extensively, on the basis of numerous biblical quotations, about the universal peace and restoration that were foreseen from eternity and will occur when, thanks to Christ, God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28, but the reference, in the usual double reference system, may also be directed to the Procline "all in all"<sup>114</sup>). Dionysius had treated all this in his lost Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις, which, according to *DN* 1, 1, preceded *De divinis nominibus*: "What could be said of Christ's love for humanity, which gives peace in profusion [εἰρηνοχότου φιλανθρωπίας]? Jesus operates *all in all* [τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσι ἐνεργοῦντος] and *realizes an unspeakable peace* [ποιοῦντος εἰρήνην ἄρρητον] *established from eternity* [ἐξ αἰῶνος προωρισμένην], and *reconciles* us to him [ἀποκαταλλάσσειντος ἡμᾶς ἐαυτῷ] in spirit, and, *through himself and in himself, to the Father* [δι' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ τῷ πατρὶ]. Of these wonderful gifts I have abundantly and sufficiently spoken [ικανῶς εἴρηται] in the *Theological Outlines*, where to our testimony is joined that of the holy inspiration of Scriptures / of the sages [λογίων]." Here, the link with peace and reconciliation and the reference to both Proclus and 1 Cor 15:28 (Origen's, Gregory of Nyssa's, and Evagrius' favourite passage in support of apokatastasis) intimates that Dionysius in his lost work may have treated the theory of apokatastasis in terms close to those in which it is described in Gregory's *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*. Like Origen and Gregory, Dionysius supported this doctrine through Scriptural quotations and exegesis. If Dionysius did ever write the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις, this work might have become lost because of the doctrine it expounded. But even in case his Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις never existed, it would be significant that Dionysius wanted to make it known that he had treated topics related to apokatastasis at length in a whole work. Nine passages in the *Corpus* expressly name the work Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις: six from *De divinis nominibus* and three from *Theologia mystica*. In *DN* 1, 1, as mentioned, Dionysius affirms that he wrote *DN* "shortly after the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις," and on Suchla 116, 7, he refers to the discussion that in the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις he devoted to the absolute transcendence and ineffability of God, to

<sup>114</sup> See my "Proclus of Constantinople" and, on the "all in all" principle between 'pagan' and Patristic Platonism, my argument in Ramelli, "Overlooked Sources," 406-476.

whom he applies the term αὐτοαγαθόν, which Origen had already applied to God the Father. Origen followed Numenius on his score, like Plotinus.<sup>115</sup>

1 Cor 15:28, which Dionysius echoes in two more passages (*DN* 7, 3; 1, 7), is Pauline. Paul was Origen's "hero" and main inspirer in numerous, major respects. Dionysius, as mentioned, presents Paul as the common teacher of both himself and Hierotheus, his master, who is likely to conceal a reference to Origen. In the excursus on evil in *DN* 4, 18, 35,<sup>116</sup> in §21 Dionysius insists on two elements from Origen: (1) a strong monism in the sentence, "the principle cannot be any duality" and must be simple (ἀπλή), and (2) evil as a consequence of free choice—the tenet of Origen's theology of freedom, based on theodicy and inherited by Nyssen.<sup>117</sup> The principle that evil is without cause or ἀναίτιον (*DN* 4, 30, 732A; 4, 32, 732D), so as to save God from any responsibility for it (to save theodicy), seems to me to take over Plato's famous definition of God as ἀναίτιος (not responsible for evil) in the myth of Er, which both Origen and Nyssen repeatedly echoed as the most important tenet of theodicy.

Dionysius in the above-mentioned passage presented the Trinity as a triune Unity (like Nyssen, he ascribed the characteristics of Plotinus' One not only to the Father, but to the whole Trinity): "As we said when we were expounding the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις, the One, the unknown, who is beyond Being and is the Good itself [αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν], that is, the triune Henad [τριαδικὴ Ἐνάς], which is all divine and good in the same way, is both ineffable and impossible to conceive." Apophatic theology derives again from Origen and Nyssen, with the language of Plato's *Timaeus* on the difficulty to find God and the impossibility to express it. On the same line (Suchla 122.11) Dionysius refers again to his lost work, saying that in it he maintained that the names of God must be ascribed to the three Persons of the Trinity indivisibly, since the Trinity is a Superunited Henad (ἡ ὑπερηνωμένη ἐνάς): again the line of Nyssen. On the same line, Dionysius also informs (*ibidem* 125.14) that in the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις he described God the Trinity as transcending the Being—as in Origen, ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας—and the Good itself as the cause of Being and of all goods.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>115</sup> See Ramelli, "Origen, Patristic Philosophy." On Numenius's protology see Dillon, "Numenius," 397–402, and on Numenius's influence on Origen see Kritikos, "Platonism and Principles," 403–417.

<sup>116</sup> In a passage that, unlike most of the rest, is not a paraphrase of Proclus' *De malorum subsistentia*.

<sup>117</sup> On Gregory's indebtedness to Origen's theology of freedom: Ramelli, *Social Justice*, chs. 5–6. On Origen's theology of freedom see also Lekkas, *Liberté et progrès*; Hengstermann, *Freiheitsmetaphysik*; Ramelli, "Origen in Gregory's Theology of Freedom," 363–388.

<sup>118</sup> "Therefore, what is unified belongs to the whole divinity, as is argued in the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις on the basis of very many reasons, drawn from Scriptures / the sages [λογίων]: that it transcends the Good [ὑπεραγαθόν], the divinity [ὑπέρθρον], the essence / being [ὑπερούσιον], life, wisdom, and all that which is characterised by an ascending abstraction [ὑπεροχικὴ ἀφαιρέσεως]; along with these, the causative epithets are also placed, such as the Good, the Beautiful, Being, life-giver, wise, and all those epithets with which the cause of all goods is called, due to all its goods, which fit the Good."

In Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις, Dionysius also explained the reasons for the distinctions and the unity among the Persons of the Trinity, even within the tight limits of human knowledge of the divine.<sup>119</sup> In *TM* 3, 1, Ritter 146, 1–9, he affirms that in his Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις he had discussed the main points of cataphatic theology, on the unity and trinity of God, the three Persons of the Trinity, the generation of the Son, his assumption of human nature, and so on, always basing himself on Scripture.<sup>120</sup> This is what Origen did in *De principiis*. Soon after, Dionysius indicates that in another lost work, his *Theologia Symbolica*, he provided an allegorical exegesis of Biblical anthropomorphisms attributed to God: “in my *Symbolic Theology* the transpositions of sense-perceptible characteristics to the divine (are examined): the meaning of forms ascribed to God, of shapes, parts of the bodies, and organs that are attributed to God, of places and worlds, of episodes of anger, sorrow, rage [...] the way we should interpret curses [...] and all the other forms that have been attributed to God in a symbolic sense.” Origen explained Biblical references to God’s anger, threats, and destructions, in the same way as Dionysius says he himself did, and reconciled them with the doctrine of restoration.

Dionysius explains next the reasons why the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις were “more concise” (βραχυλογώτερα) than the *Symbolic Theology*: because they proceeded from on high and the beginning (ἄνω), from God, the first Principle, down to creatures and their existence in time, until “the last things,” τὰ ἔσχατα, an expression that, as I suggested, is to be also understood in an eschatological sense.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις began with God as first ἀρχή, as in Origen’s *De principiis*, and arrived, like Origen, at the eventual apokatastasis.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, Dionysius treated apokatastasis within the framework of theology and Christology, as in Nyssen’s *Tunc et ipse*. The investigation into the nature of God, insofar as possible, and into the “gifts of Christ” allows theologians to envisage what eschatology will look like for God’s creatures. Again, even on the hypothesis that the Θεολογικαὶ ὑποτυπώσεις never existed, it would be significant that Dionysius indicates their structure as

<sup>119</sup> Suchla 130.5: “For all that is divine, even what has been manifested, can be known only by participation, but in itself, how it is according to its principle and constitution, this transcends intellect and every essence and knowledge.”

<sup>120</sup> “In the *Theological Outlines* I sang the main points of cataphatic theology, how the divine and good nature is called one, forming a unity [ένική], and how it is called triune [τριαδική]; what is paternity in it and what sonship; what theological discourse concerning the Spirit means; how from the immaterial Good, deprived of parts, lights sprang off, from the heart of Goodness, and how these have remained inseparable from the eternal *manentia*, coeternal with the bud, *manentia* of the Father in himself, *manentia* of the Father in himself and the Son in himself, and of the Father and the Son reciprocally; how superessential Jesus has substantiated himself with the truth of the human nature, and all the rest that is sung in the *Theological Outlines*, revealed by Scriptures / by the sages [λογίων].”

<sup>121</sup> Κάκει μὲν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄνω πρὸς τὰ ἔσχατα κατιῶν ὁ λόγος. Argument in my *Apokatastasis*, section on Dionysius.

<sup>122</sup> On the structure of *De principiis*: Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy”; Fernández, “Pedagogical Structure,” 15–22; Behr, *Origen*, 1, xxx–xxxvi.

similar to the structure of Origen's masterpiece (and likely alluding to the treatment of eschatology).

Without dealing here with the issue of the relation between the Corpus' Greek and Syriac redactions, I only remark that a similar problem is found with two other important Origenian works: Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*, with its two Syriac redactions, the question of their reciprocal relation, and their connection with the Greek fragments.<sup>123</sup> Dionysius, at least in the Greek edition available to us, emerges as a profoundly Origenian thinker, as I said, more than radically Origenistic.

It is useful "to examine the extant Greek text for traces of Origenist doctrines."<sup>124</sup> I discovered many of these, including the theory of mysticism and love and the doctrine of apokatastasis in the Corpus, not, again, in an Origenistic or radical form, as it is the case in Sudhaili or in post-Evagrian thought, but in an Origenian form, closer to the genuine philosophical theology of Origen (a major presence behind the Corpus) and his follower Nyssen. The Corpus is "not polemical against the doctrinal contents of Origenism"<sup>125</sup> but more against "pagan"<sup>126</sup> philosophy and Manichaeism, such as in the excursus on evil in *DN* 4.

This is why Dionysius, besides regularly conflating Plato and Scripture, as Origen had done throughout the Corpus uses a double-reference scheme to both 'pagan' and Christian Neoplatonism, and was accused of "using the ideas of the Greeks against the Greeks" (τοῖς Ἑλλήνων ἐπὶ τοὺς Ἕλληνας, *Ep.* 7). The scheme of the "double references" to both 'pagan' Platonism and Christian Platonism / Christianity / Scripture, pointed out above, is also clear in Dionysius' references to God as "all in all" (*DN* 1, 7, 596C; 9, 4, 912D), both a quotation from 1 Cor 15:28, continually cited by Origen, especially in support of apokatastasis, and an expression used by later 'pagan' Neoplatonism.<sup>126</sup>

The line denounced in *Ep.* 7 was probably that taken by the Athenian Platonic school against Christian Platonists, probably Dionysius after he became a Christian (if he was a convert, as Panayiotis Tzamalikos, Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi, and others hypothesise),<sup>127</sup> but, I suspect, also against Origen. Origen had used the ideas of

<sup>123</sup> See Ramelli, *Kephalaia Gnostika*; Ramelli, "Evagrius' *Kephalaia Gnostika*," 73–98; I address Casiday's thesis on the relation between the two recensions in Ramelli, "Gregory Nyssen's and Evagrius' Relations."

<sup>124</sup> Perczel, "Notes on the Earliest Greco-Syriac Reception of the Dionysian Corpus," 35.

<sup>125</sup> Mainoldi, *Dietro Dionigi l'Areopagita*, 485. Only, the label "Origenian-Evagrian intellectualism" (487) is debatable, since Origen's and Evagrius' apophaticism and their placing agape at the same level as *nous* correct their intellectualism. See Ramelli, "Evagrius Ponticus, the Origenian Ascetic," 147–205.

<sup>126</sup> The potential reciprocal influences will be the object of a specific study.

<sup>127</sup> CarloMaria Mazzucchi, Vanneste, Hathaway, Tuomo Lankila, and Brons deem him a (crypto-)pagan. Like István Perczel, Paul Rorem, Ysabel de Andia, Alexander Golitzin, Mainoldi, and others, among whom Paul Gavriyuk, "Did Pseudo-Dionysius Live," Andrew Louth, *The Origins*, sees in Dionysius a Christian, a hypothesis already envisaged by Hausherr and Balthasar, and views the *Caelestis Hierarchia* as a response to the *Book of Hierotheus*.

the Greeks, as Porphyry already noted (*C.Chr.* F39, Harnack),<sup>128</sup> *against the Greeks*, that is, to support Christianity rationally, and applied them and allegoresis, as a philosophical tool, to the interpretation of Scripture: an operation that Porphyry deemed illegitimate (*ibidem*).<sup>129</sup>

Porphyry absorbed much of Christian Platonism, but with an opposite aim. Besides his familiarity with Origen's scriptural allegoresis, his use of Origen's notion of Hypostasis (part of his "epoptics"),<sup>130</sup> and his knowledge of Scripture (as revealed in his anti-Christian polemic), Porphyry's Biblical quotations and echoes even outside direct polemic are remarkable. For instance, he describes Plotinus' love for the divinity in scriptural terms: Plotinus "loved the divine with his entire soul, always striving towards it" (σπεύδων πρὸς τὸ θεῖον, οὗ διὰ πάσης τῆς ψυχῆς ἦρα, *V.Plot.* 23, 6). The commandment of loving God with all of one's soul is scriptural, taken up explicitly by Jesus. The only difference Porphyry introduces is (Platonic) ἔρωσ terminology instead of (Biblical) ἀγάπη, but this was already a novelty of Origen, especially in *Commentary on Canticles*, followed, as mentioned, by Nyssen and Dionysius.

On purpose, I suspect, Dionysius countered Porphyry's criticism of Origen's application of Greek allegoresis to Scripture, which he labels "an absurdity" (ἀτοπία, *C.Chr.* F39, Harnack), since Dionysius adopted from Origen the allegorico-symbolic hermeneutics of inspired Scripture. Dionysius denounced that "uninitiated" (ἀτελέσι) deemed Scriptural allegoresis, which clarifies "what the *inspired oracles* [λόγια] say in *riddles* about divine mysteries," an "outstanding absurdity" (ἀτοπίαν δεινὴν, *Ep.* 9). Also given the verbal parallel, Dionysius was very likely replying to Porphyry (qua Origen's accuser) here in Letter 9, as well as, in Letter 7, to the whole 'pagan' Platonic charge of using Hellenic ideas against the Hellenes that was levelled against Dionysius and Christian Platonism: Origen and his line.<sup>131</sup>

Dionysius' general principle is indeed the same that animated Origen: both could have been accused of "parricide" towards 'pagan' philosophy, particularly Platonism: as the full passage notes, "the sophist Apollonophanes, calling me 'parricide', is accusing me of making unholy use of Greek things... but it is the Greeks who make unholy use of godly things to attack God!" (*Ep.* 7.2). Origen thought the same and proved it, especially in *Contra Celsum*.

<sup>128</sup> Analysis in Ramelli, "Origen, Patristic Philosophy" and in further work.

<sup>129</sup> Demonstration in Ramelli, "The Philosophical Stance," 335–371, further Ramelli, "Allegorising and Philosophising."

<sup>130</sup> As I argued in Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and Hypostasis."

<sup>131</sup> Proclus speaks very much of Origen as a Platonist, and admires him although he criticises him, but, if he was speaking of the Christian Origen (possible, although not sure), he never mentions that he was a Christian.

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# The Via Negativa and the Aura of Words

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**Abstract:** The negative capacity is essential to creative thinking; we find it in the transcendentalism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though the Neoplatonist explanation of unknowing goes far further than simply pointing to the beyond; the idea of aura provides some understanding of how a word retains its influence even when negated; words or names are crucial in the move upwards in the mystical journey, and in the Neoplatonist and Christian tradition names or words are said to be fundamental, despite the *via negativa*; the linguistic ontology of Platonism underpins the existence of the names: but we do not have to believe in the ontic status of names for their aura to operate as we meditate over them.

**Keywords:** aura, *via negativa*, unknowing (*agnosia*), privation, abstraction, names (*onomata*), Plotinus, Plato, Proclus, Damascius, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius

## 1. Text

The English poet John Keats wrote about the negative capability required of the artist, or of the poet in his case. He says in a letter to his brothers that a writer must have this capacity, to dwell in the land of uncertainty. “I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...”<sup>1</sup>

In his poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, he focuses our attention on the vase, but draws it away to something other, beyond what is present to our attention and immediately available to the senses, to what lies beyond. He does this by means of the negative – “Heard music is sweet, but unheard music is sweeter.” And also “the spirit ditties of no tone”: that is, music which has no melody. There is also negative modification, which is less than outright denial or removal: “Thou still unravished bride of quietness, foster child of silence and slow time.” The mention of quietness and slow time, as opposed to noise and fast time, uses negation to create a scene where there is a sense of something absent.

The use of the negative draws us away into that land of uncertainty, where we escape the limitation of scientific precision, and it achieves that emancipation of the spirit from the cognitively present and available, which means that we are not arrested by the physical structure surrounding us.

<sup>1</sup> Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 193–194.

We live in an age of strong scientific confidence. Findings are contested all the time, but in general knowledge does seem to move forward, albeit at a slow pace. The impulse to conquest through knowledge is very strong, and some believe that nothing will eventually escape the human cognitive capacity. Aristotle is an ancient example of somebody who appeared to believe that the human cognitive capacity could eventually grasp, classify, and explain every part of reality. This is very different from the allusive capacity of negation which Keats is attempting to suggest: rather than enabling the human mind to go on reaching into the available present, this passage of Keats suggests that that process should stop and give way to an unknowingness. It is important to note that this involves an opening of the mind, rather than a closing of it.

The scientific confidence in the cognitive capacity of the human mind is the driver of much discovery but is ironically also a symptom of the vanity of the human animal. The allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* warns us to be cautious about being overconfident of the reach of our senses and of our minds.

The negative way explores transcendence, or that which is beyond our minds, and thus appears to be quite open-ended. This paper concerns the way in which the exploration of the negative is subject to controls, and how it may be linked to a disciplined body of thought, such as a dogmatic theology or philosophy. Concern for precision of language can coexist with a radical exploration of the realm of the negative, and the very wide field of that which we do not know, the field of ignorance, or *agnosia*. Unknowing, *agnosia*, becomes a way of apprehending every bit as powerful as knowing itself.

First things first: the *via negativa* and statements of the transcendent. Early Christianity with its Judaic background recognises the transcendent, and the idea that God is beyond our normal understanding. In the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures God is represented as appearing in a burning bush (Exod 3:1–14) and there is even an apparent exploration of the negative: the bush burns but is not consumed. In him there is no variableness or shadow of turning (Jas 1:17–18) – God is a being which does not cast a shadow. In these kinds of examples we start with the known and familiar, but then there is the negation which takes us into the unfamiliar – the bush which burns but never burns up, or the being which is there but does not cast a shadow.

In Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin from the book of Acts, there is reference to the temple not made with hands (Acts 7:48), which again constitutes an exhortation to look beyond the familiar works of human construction, and to avoid having one's gaze constricted by looking only at what humans can do and know. And the Judaic repudiation of idolatry is well known: God is not captured in representations or images such as the golden calf, to which the Israelites dedicated themselves while Moses was communing with God and receiving the ten commandments (Exod 32:1–14).

In each of these examples there is a familiar starting point, followed by a negation: the temple of Stephen is followed by the idea of the temple not made with

hands, the “not built” temple, that other spiritual temple. Stephen the Hellenist is here introducing some of the internationalism which is taken up by Paul, and by which a Judaic cult which originated in the land of the temple comes to be a world-wide religion without parochial or national ties.

So the issue is this: is the familiar starting point a necessary part of the *via negativa*, and does it provide an anchor for the flow of spiritual or philosophical thought which follows the negation of one aspect of the familiar? Does something of the aura of the original term dominate the exploration of the “not this” which follows? Does the word “temple” still influence our meditation over the non-temple, the one not made with hands?

The term aura is familiar from both Latin and Greek, and in both languages it denotes the breeze, perhaps from the sea, and eventually the sweet odour given off by incense, or some other attractive object of sense perception. The word aura in Greek took a decisive turn with Socrates in the *Republic*, who speaks of the importance of craftsmen and the beauty of their work: he says that the influence which comes from a work of beauty may waft over us like a breeze (*aura*) which brings health from elsewhere, from some healthy region, a “breath of fresh air” as we say in English. The word aura now refers to the emanation of spiritual beauty and the way in which its presence has its impact on us: this is close to the breeze of beauty from the work of art, which wafts over us, in the words of Socrates who was of course originally trained as a sculptor.<sup>2</sup>

Later, in Virgil, we find another meaning of the word *aura*, the Latin word simply having been transliterated from the Greek: in the famous passage of *Aeneid*,<sup>3</sup> we have the golden bough which Aeneas had to carry through the underworld to guarantee safe passage. Here the aura is the gleam of the gold perceived by Aeneas, contrasting with the green of the leaves of the tree.

We now understand the aura to be the impenetrable spiritual strength given off by a work of art or a person of some particular charismatic gift. In this we benefit from a transition in the meaning of the word aura, this transition being created by the language of Socrates in the *Republic*, combined with the language of Virgil, who sees the aura as the gleam of the gold, a gleam of light, (*aura auri*) in the golden bough.

Does the aura of a word hang over it even when negated? If in my meditation I choose to see God as the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14),<sup>4</sup> and if I begin to negate aspects of that image, so that I imagine a shepherd who is of course good, but without the staff, and without a physical location, then I begin to explore through

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Resp.* 401C–D.

<sup>3</sup> Vergil, *Aen.* 6.204.

<sup>4</sup> Notice that Jesus in this story contrasts the good Shepherd with the “not good” Shepherd, who is simply a hired hand and does not own the sheep. He uses a negation to clarify the original image.

the *via negativa* the unknown side of that image. Then I may remove the image of the good from my mind. But does the aura remain? Does the shepherd of the mental picture continue to hang over my meditation so that the aura of that original image is retained? So that wherever I go with it, the original image continues to exert its influence? Or is the negative way a kind of complete abandonment of the familiar and the known, a complete departure. Is there no breeze of beauty, as per Socrates, wafting over us, coming from the original language and the original imagery? This is the question to be explored in this paper.

## 2. Jewish Judaeo-Christian Transcendentalism and the *via negativa*

The *via negativa* as it develops in Platonism, both pagan and Christian, is a systematic exploration of the negative. This is fundamentally different from ordinary Judaeo-Christian transcendentalism, in that not only does it recognise that there is something beyond, but also involves an exploration of that which is beyond.

The *via negativa* begins in a narrow form, with privation (*steresis*) as the main instrument for refining thought. But Plotinus develops the *via negativa* in probably its earliest complete form and turns in the end to abstraction (*aphaeresis*) as the purifying technique most appropriate to the negative way.

Interestingly enough, Plotinus is also very concerned with the precision of language, its exactitude. This comes out in the discussion of the *touto*, “this.” Plotinus is here commenting on the passage of Plato’s *Timaeus* which concerns the permanent flux, a problem inherited from Heracleitus, which Plato addresses by wondering whether the demonstrative pronouns “this!” or “that!” can actually be used where there is continuous flux.

Plato told a story which illustrates his point perfectly: imagine a goldsmith making all kinds of figures out of gold, and imagine that he then proceeds to melt them down and remake them into every other figure, so that one figurine, say a triangle, then becomes one of the others, and vice versa. If we were to point to one of the figurines and ask what it is, knowing that it is about to change into the shape of something else, the safest answer would be that it is gold. But as for the various shapes which were formed: “... one should never describe them as ‘being’ seeing that they change even while one is mentioning them; rather one should be content if the figure admits of even the title ‘suchlike’ (*toioutos*) being applied to it with any safety.”<sup>5</sup>

The question is whether, if change is continuous, we can ever justifiably use the word “this,” as the thing in question may have already become something else. Plato was raising these questions against a background of philosophers questioning

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Tim.* 50B (LCL 234).



where names came from and what their purpose was, and facing the additional question of the idea of permanent change which had been advocated by Heraclitus. If change was continuous and the idea of permanent realities was an illusion, what then was the point of language and of naming things?

It was even the case among the followers of Heraclitus that brevity and terseness of speech were much valued, as the subject of the conversation might imminently disappear, owing to the ever present flux – or so Proclus tells us much later.<sup>6</sup> Speedy communication was necessary. One had to strike while the iron was hot or run the risk of there being no iron.

Plato even suggested that we might have to do away with the demonstrative pronoun “this,” and content ourselves with the word “suchlike” (*toioutos*). It is interesting to note that even the adjective suchlike suggests some form of knowledge of what we are dealing with in the physical world, if the object we are looking at is simply “like this” then we are admitting some permanent substance which returns, albeit in different formations.

Plotinus quite assertively disagrees with Plato and wants to preserve “this”: “the *this* is not empty of meaning ...”<sup>7</sup> In fact the whole of *Ennead* VI turns on the question of linguistic precision, in that the ontological categorisation carried out by Plotinus is always accompanied by the question of the exact meaning of words. So that for Plotinus language has a precise demonstrative function: certain words or names belong to certain things. There is a thing underlying the thought, and we use the term “this” demonstratively, instead of using the name.<sup>8</sup> Some language is possible.

Side-by-side with this Aristotelian-style concern for the precision of language, we find articulated the beginnings of the *via negativa*. Plotinus looks at the idea of privation (*steresis*) in order to determine whether this is the appropriate terminology for the negative way which he wishes to outline, but the previous definition of the term by Aristotle means that privation relies on a being for it to be operated, as it posits the absence of something which is familiar and known, and which might normally be expected to be there: one might “deprive” the white swan of its whiteness, through privation, but this whiteness is known and would be expected to be present. Privation applies to familiar entities which belong to the substrate. The other similar term, *aphaeresis*, or abstraction, is more appropriate to the negative way as it involves a systematic removal of predicates for exploratory reasons: this is the beginning of mysticism. In an earlier work I dealt with this, likening abstraction to the gradual removing of encrustations on reality until a new vision is achieved.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria* (Duvick, 14).

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6 (34).13,57 to 59ff.

<sup>8</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6 (34).13,57 to 59ff.

<sup>9</sup> Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 57.

In the course of its journey through Neoplatonism, the *via negativa* becomes much less about the refinement of concepts, and much more about the exploration of that which is beyond thinking, the area of unknowing, or *agnosia*. There is a process of removing that which is lower level physical concept formation, based on the visible and the familiar, but there is also the exploration of that area beyond, once the process of removal has been achieved. This is the capacity for unknowing, and the 6<sup>th</sup> century Platonist Damascius takes the idea of unknowing to its most developed extent. The felt need for language becomes an impotent psychological state, the state of desiring words and desiring to express things in words is there, but “all that we can say here is but vain rhapsody.”<sup>10</sup>

Damascius takes an important step in that he views unknowing as a capacity of the subject, just as knowledge of lower things is also a capacity of the subject. It is a mistake to focus on the unknowability of the object, but rather we should focus on our own internal capacity for unknowing, for pursuing the mystical and wandering in the landscape of the not known.<sup>11</sup> This presentation of unknowing as a human subjective capacity completely reverses the idea of negative theology being based on cognitive inadequacy, and turns it into an instrument of the human soul, using its capacity for mystical apprehension as a positive way forward.

There is a radicalism here in pagan Platonism which finds some echoes in the Christian tradition, and may be represented by the Christian Platonism of Dionysius, itself closer to the Platonism of Proclus, who seeks to avoid gaps or any discontinuity in the chain of being.

The author of the medieval work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, sees the negation of the imagination as the necessary prelude to the mystical vision; the tyranny of the imagination is due to original sin. Before Adam sinned, imagination was obedient to reason, and was the servant of reason: now it is different, in that the imagination “never ceases, whether we are asleep or awake, to present various unseemly images of bodily creatures, or else some fanciful picture, which is either a bodily representation of a spiritual thing or else the spiritual representation of a bodily thing. Such representations are always deceptive and compounded with error.”<sup>12</sup>

The image making capacity of the imagination is what must be done away with in the course of the negative pathway. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* goes on to say: “... A man can never, by the work of his understanding, arrive at the knowledge of an uncreated spiritual thing, which is nothing except God. But by the failing of it, he can. For where his understanding fails is in nothing except God alone; and it was for this reason that Saint Denis said, ‘the truly divine knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing.’”<sup>13</sup>

10 Damascius, *Dubitationes* 7 (Ruelle, 14); see also Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 124–126.

11 See Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, 126.

12 [Anonymous], *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 65.

13 [Anonymous], *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 70.

This is the path of the negative way as it evolves in the Western tradition: the exploration of unknowing. Unknowing does not mean ignorance, but refers to the exploration of the region beyond thought and ordinary comprehension.

### 3. Words and Names

As patristic philosophy developed, there was an increasing problem over names or nouns (*onomata*). In his work on Gregory of Nyssa, Martin Laird has coined the word *logophasis* in order to characterise the final stage of the negative or apophatic meditation: in this account of the thought of Gregory, the logos is the supreme state of faith-based apprehension, and infuses everything. This logophatic state transcends mere words with – how shall we put it? – language of a higher order, discourse, or faith-based understanding. There is of course available in ancient Greek the term *kataphasis*, which means assertion or affirmation, and provides the counterpart to *apophasis* which means negation: one assumes that Martin Laird bypassed this ordinary word in pursuit of the idea of a higher form of language or discourse. And it is true that Gregory does not want to do away with all language in the final analysis.

It is interesting that for Gregory the higher form of cognition is faith, as in the process of transcending the mundane, it is the eye of faith which sees things which are not available to the mind. This alliance between faith and mysticism becomes very strong, and the *via negativa* provides a role for faith in this higher form of cognition, which is beyond the intellect. In his sixth homily Gregory comments<sup>14</sup> on the Song of Solomon “on my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loved” and he discusses the ascent of the bride, starting by her move into darkness which designates the ascent through the *via negativa*: she seeks her beloved and expects to find him by means of faith. She says, in Gregory’s words, that the beloved escapes the prison of her thinking but she continues to seek. In passing through the heights she asks the angels whether they have seen the object of her love, but they keep silent, and the silence of the angels is interpreted as pointing to the ungraspable character of the divine nature.

Yet as Laird points out, the bride is guided by the Word, and from her mouth come the riches of the Word.<sup>15</sup> There is clearly an issue about preserving names, at least in some form or at some level. The impulse towards wordless contemplation of the divinity is tempered by the need for some kind of anchor, in some kind of language.

<sup>14</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 6. 181.6.

<sup>15</sup> Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 168.

This issue goes back to the *Cratylus* of Plato, in which the topic is the correctness of names. Whilst there appear to be a number of fanciful derivations and etymologies on display in this dialogue, and whilst there is a comic element, there are of course serious issues at stake. The giving of names, or nouns, is the question and where they come from: the issue is whether names are purely conventional, or they are there “by nature.” The perpetual flux as discussed above is mentioned as a problem,<sup>16</sup> and against this is set up the possibility that there is a permanent reality lying behind: is the beauty of a particular face just a stage in the flux or is there an absolute beauty standing permanently behind it? Plato seems to be seeking a way of underpinning the permanence and strength of names, and tries different hypotheses: one is that the name has a resemblance to the object, in the same way that an artwork has a resemblance to the scene portrayed.<sup>17</sup> One might, for example, step up to a man and say here is your portrait, it obviously resembles you; and similarly one might say here is your name, it obviously belongs to you. This hypothesis does not really work but throughout Plato seems to retain the idea of a name-giver, whose job it is to ensure the correctness of names. Another hypothesis attempted is the view that names naturally bear the imprint of the reality they designate and are formed by nature itself. Yet another hypothesis is that there was a name-giver, a form of intellect which was responsible for name-giving and also the correctness of the names given: in other words, the correctness of names is not a result of a natural encounter with language, on which they live their imprint, but the results of intelligent design.<sup>18</sup> We are left with a kind of unsolved problem in the *Cratylus* in that names are obviously part of the natural order and have come into being through the same process as other beings, yet they bear a specific relationship to certain entities as their names: they in some sense belong to those entities, and represent them, and so the question is how are they created and how do we explain this matching relationship? Throughout the dialogue there is a concern to uphold the rightness of names, alongside a typical Platonic exploration of why this view is difficult.

But the key, for Plato, is probably a passage of the *Philebus*, in which Socrates expresses the great awe in which he holds the names of the gods, which is “beyond the greatest human fear.”<sup>19</sup> This is a view that the right name is the key to real piety, and that it enables us to grasp something real and transcendent: the name is not just a matter of communication, a code developed by human artifice in order to pass information in a human way, but a real pathway to the divine and entry into the presence of the divine.

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Crat.* 439D.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Crat.* 430A–B.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Crat.* 416C–D.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Phileb.* 12C.

#### 4. Names and the Negative Way

So we have a real tension between the developing idea of exploring unknowingness (*agnosia*), and the preservation of some language, whether the kataphatic language of Gregory of Nyssa, or the principle of the rightness of certain given names. The aura of language hangs over these discussions, the breeze coming from the higher regions, to use the language of Socrates. Quite why the names are correct and solidly implanted in the transcendent world is not entirely clear, but they are given and must be held in the highest awe, to use the language of the *Philebus*.

This seems to be the position of Pseudo-Dionysius, the great exponent of negative theology who influenced so much of subsequent Western philosophy and theology. Dionysius is the heir to a debate in Platonism<sup>20</sup> over names and their value, and unlike Damascius he will not dismiss the human capacity to operate through names.

There is a probable pathway here through Proclus, the Athenian Platonist of the fifth century AD, who represented a kind of flowering of paganism at that time. He espoused a sophisticated and developed paganism which was shortly to see its end, in the West at least, and which had come to resemble Christianity in its theology and its practice. This could of course be put differently, in that Christianity and Paganism could be said to have come to resemble each other at that time. Proclus and his colleague wrote a commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*, and throughout this document we see him grappling with the problems raised by Plato in that dialogue, namely the problem of whether names exist, the nature of this existence, and how it comes about that there is a relationship between names and that which they denote.<sup>21</sup>

Proclus deals with the claim that names are merely conventional: Hermogenes had argued that they were, but there was nevertheless a correct set of conventions so that not just any word would do. Proclus and the Excerptor colleague dispose of this quite quickly, arguing that if names are merely conventional people in different places would call different things by different names, and there would be chaos.<sup>22</sup>

There is an interesting section on whether naming is the same as speaking, and the conclusion the commentators draw is that a name is a part of speech, and the conclusion is that naming is speaking, albeit only a part of speech. One supposes that the underlying problem here is that it is difficult to explain the existence of a name if there is no utterance: how does it subsist, what is its role?<sup>23</sup> Later the commentators go on to explain that the name is an instrument (48) and an instrument must be used like a tool: if the name is picked arbitrarily or conventionally and it will not match

<sup>20</sup> See Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, II, chapters on Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>21</sup> This commentary, *On Plato Cratylus*, has been annotated and translated by Brian Duvick, edited by Harold Tarrant.

<sup>22</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 30, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 45.

the task which is called upon to do, and so the name is tied in with the doctrine of function: the name is the appropriate tool for the utterance to be made.

In their view there is something sacred about names, in that the lawgiver has established them: the commentators on the *Cratylus* associate the idea of the lawgiver with the platonic demiurge, known from the *Timaeus*, the creator God himself, and here associated with Intellect. The benefits of using the names as given are twofold, one being that communication is enabled and the other is the appreciation of sameness or difference, which is again the province of intellect.<sup>24</sup>

The Proclus text envisages the demiurge as threefold in character, and there is no doubt that names are given from above: “to the extent that he knows himself and all the other divine genera together, partakes of them all, and is distinguished by his own particular substance, each of the gods supplies subsistence to the divine names, which are incomprehensible (*agnosta*) and ineffable (*aphthegkta*) to us, inasmuch as all of the intellectual and the divine entities exist in us spiritually.”<sup>25</sup>

We note that the names are given substance by the divine triad, and so they are nourished ontologically from above. In addition, they are of the realm of the unknown (our translator has given “incomprehensible” above), but they are also ineffable. The translation “ineffable” possibly hides a point of importance: the Greek here really suggests that these words or names are not spoken, they are not voiced; not so much that they are unspeakable. They simply rest in the realm of unknowing and are considered in silence. As we saw above, Proclus has a distinction drawn between the speech act of using a name, and simply the knowing of a name in a speechless way. Voicing a name is using it as a tool, but the highest names remain unvoiced.

## 5. Dionysius, the *via negativa*, and the *Divine Names*

Proclus and his collaborator have provided us with the context for Pseudo-Dionysius, who was inspired by theological Paganism at its highest point. What he gives us is the platonic respect for names, and an attempted demonstration that the names he collects from biblical sources are compatible with this platonic theology. The theology he lays out is highly reminiscent of Proclus, who systematises the explorations of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the *Symposium* as well as the other dialogues, and this theology is based on the developing tradition of Neoplatonism: in this way Proclus gives us a fully formulated “platonic theology.” Dionysius is very much in this tradition, and the *Divine Names* should be seen as an apologetic work, in defence of and for the perpetuation of Platonism. There are selected biblical quotations – lists

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Tim.* 51.19.

<sup>25</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, section 135 (Duvick, 78).

collected in a possibly cursory study – and there is of course the knockout quotation of St Paul on the Areopagus hill, and the question of the unknown God. Perfect material for an apologist seeking to subordinate scriptural teaching to the pre-eminence of Platonism. He is somewhat like Clement of Alexandria in another key, Dionysius attempting to present Judaeo-Christianity as easily included in and subordinated to Platonism. Whereas Clement scattered pagan wisdom throughout his writings on biblical issues, Dionysius scatters occasional biblical allusions (only occasional) throughout a narrative of platonic theology: it is the Platonism which is always developed at much greater length. Taking for example the section about the good in the *Divine Names*:<sup>26</sup> “But now let me speak about the good, about that which truly is and which gives being to everything else. The God who transcends everything by virtue of his power. He is the substantive cause and maker of being, subsistence, of existence, of substance, and of nature. He is the source and measure of the ages.”<sup>27</sup>

For these last words, the translator, Colm Luibhéid, with Paul Rorem, refers us to a possible biblical source, Heb 1:2 as a background: even this is dubious, though it may come close to being a biblical allusion. The point is that the whole passage is an exposition of what might be called standard processional ontological Platonism, as if the meaning of the biblical texts were not clear enough to be understood without this scaffolding.

Daniel Jugrin has written on Dionysian unknowing as well as the unknowing of Gregory of Nyssa, which culminates in the language of assertion, as we have seen with the term *logophasis*.<sup>28</sup> He quotes the *Divine Names* 872A, to the effect that God is known both through knowing, and through unknowing. They are both treated as capacities, and as we have noted, this is the position of Damascius; they are given equal weighting. Dionysius emphasises that the unknowing of that which is beyond being, is itself beyond speech, mind or being itself,<sup>29</sup> and here we find the differentiation between speech and language which was noted earlier in relation to Proclus. It is one thing to know the divine names, and another thing to utter them. Meditation in silence may take place, using the divine names.

Dionysius lists all the available biblical names in 596A and thereafter, but prefacing his list with the statement that the divine is the nameless One. Having given a long list of biblical names he concludes that though nameless, he is the cause of all and “has” the names of everything that is, “for he is their cause, their source, and their destiny.”<sup>30</sup>

It is this view that underpins the attachment to names in the negative theology of this period, and in particular that of Dionysius: the names are part of an ontological

<sup>26</sup> Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 817C–D.

<sup>27</sup> Luibhéid, *Pseudo-Dionysius the Complete Works*, 98.

<sup>28</sup> Jugrin, “*Agnōsia*,” 102–115.

<sup>29</sup> Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 588A.

<sup>30</sup> Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 569C (56).

procession in the course of which they are brought into being, as much as any other being. They are not “given” in the sense that a Mosaic commandment might be given (the demiurge is in no way like Moses), but they are part of the ontological structure of the real. They themselves have being, so they need not be spoken, and they express themselves in their own reality. They are part of what is given.

We began this paper with the idea of aura, and the flavour or tone of the word which can last beyond the presence of the word: we do not find this idea used here, because the ontological guarantee of the names does not leave open a need for any other explanation of their binding character, or of the influence they possess in the course of a meditation. They are simply there. The idea of the ontological underpinning of the names, which comes from the processional generation of reality, emanating from the One, crowds out other thinking about the power of words.

The issue is that there must be something which prevents unknowing from simply becoming wild speculation, or a maenadic dance of random character. This factor is the anchoring power of names. In addition, names are necessary for orthodoxy, any kind of orthodoxy.

The refreshing breeze, or aura, coming from the beauty of the arts which we saw with Socrates, may well apply to the words drawn from the context of Judaean-Christian teaching. The good Shepherd is an image which is extremely powerful, and continues to flavour any meditation, even that which goes beyond words. Words, even if negated, provide the comfort of their own presence, through the aura which they generate. The aura remains, despite the denuding of content effected by the *via negativa*.

It is not necessary to have recourse to the linguistic ontology of the Neoplatonists to be able to savour the compass of a word when one has gone long beyond it. And so at the end of antiquity we find ourselves returned to its beginning, with the *Philebus* principle that the divine names must be regarded with the utmost awe.

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# How Negative Is the Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite?

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**Abstract:** This paper considers three recent studies on the negative theology of the Neoplatonists and Dionysius the Areopagite. The first is that of Lloyd Gerson, who argues that the One in Plotinus does not lack transcendence but only definite existence; the second is the contrary thesis of Eric D. Perl that not only the One of Plotinus but the God of Dionysius transcend all being in such a way that they cannot be credited with existence. After some criticism of both the paper turns to the argument of Timothy D. Knepper that even the ineffability of the divine cannot be stated on our present plane of knowledge; it concludes with some reflections on the appeal to present or future experience as alternatives to epistemology as this is commonly understood in the analytical tradition of philosophy.

**Keywords:** apophaticism, negative theology, mysticism, Dionysius the Areopagite, Neoplatonism

In Christian theology and apologetic, the personal character of God is frequently asserted today with a vehemence that might have surprised their mediaeval precursors, and would surely have amused the Greek philosophers of antiquity, who, even as they deplored the anthropomorphic superstitions of their countrymen, were ridiculed by Christians for their willing participation in popular cults. It is fashionable to blame Christian philosophers of that period for imposing a loveless and soulless concept of divine transcendence upon the living, though elusive God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; for those who believe this, the most accomplished master of misdirection in the ancient canon, more culpable even than Origen or Augustine, is the impostor who styled himself Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>1</sup> The charge against him is that he rewrote the scriptures not only on a Greek model, but on the model supplied by one Greek school in particular, which had stripped the gods of all attributes, even the attribute of being, and substituted a cipher for which no better name could be found than the Good or the One. So far did the teaching of Dionysius and his Greek and Platonic masters depart from their Greek and Christian models that even Dean Inge, a sympathetic expositor of Plotinus, complained that in sensibility he was

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 358–375. Anders Nygren assimilates Dionysius to Proclus partly by construing his “divine eros” as a function of the worshipper (*ibidem*, 364–365) and partly by treating Proclus’ one clear reference to the descent of Eros as an axiom of his philosophy (*ibidem*, 352). The originality of Dionysius is acknowledged, without denying the influence of Proclus, by Rist, “A Note on Eros and Agape.”

Oriental rather than western – that is, his conception of the self and the primal consciousness were so austere denuded of finite properties that nothing remained to quicken our love or reverence.<sup>2</sup> Scholars since Inge have sometimes endorsed and sometimes challenged his estimates of both Plotinus and Dionysius, and if they have distinguished these authors have usually maintained that as Dionysius is the more Christian his deity is the more personal. In the most recent scholarship, however, we are presented on the one hand with an understanding of the Plotinian One that is far from impersonal, and on the other with a reading of Dionysius that denies that his God can even be said to exist. My purpose in this paper is to examine both of these essays in revision and to explain why I am inclined for the most part to favour the more traditional position, according to which the true theist of the two is Dionysius. I shall not pretend to know how the metaphysical difficulties which beset his theology when it is thus interpreted can be solved.

## 1. What Is the Negative Way?

Three modes of speech about the transcendent have come to be regarded as canonical.<sup>3</sup> The *via analogiae* explains what it is for God to be just or wise or good by analogy with the same attributes as they appear in human beings – or rather, on the strict Thomistic view, explains his relation to his attributes as he possesses them by analogy with our relation to the same attributes as we possess them. The *via eminentiae* invites us to imagine the wisdom, the justice and the goodness that we know exalted to the highest conceivable degree and then beyond this. In contrast to the *via analogiae*, it appears to give a univocal sense to these terms when used of God and of his creatures, differentiating them only in degree and not in kind. Some would reply that a difference in kind is nothing more than a difference in degree when it reaches a certain limit, as shortening the wavelength of red light will produce first orange and finally blue. Be that as it may, the *via analogiae* and the *via eminentiae* concur at least in permitting us to apply quotidian terms to God, in however elusive a sense, whereas the third way, the *via negativa*, disarms us of every resource by denying that anything that is said of God can be true. God is not just, not wise, not good: by the daring logic of Meister Eckhart, “I am better than God.”<sup>4</sup> It was the *via negativa* that led some Gnostics to say that God is *nihil*, or nothing,<sup>5</sup> which is what the same theologians

<sup>2</sup> Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 105–106. See further Edwards, “Three Theologians,” 585–587.

<sup>3</sup> Festugière, *Dieu Inconnu*, 75–82.

<sup>4</sup> Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 236.

<sup>5</sup> For Basilides see Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.21.1, 7.21.5 and 7.22.6; on the *anousios* God of Mark the Mage see Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.42.4.

say of matter. David Hume is not the only sceptic to wonder whether a God who is nothing can be distinguished from a God who simply is not.<sup>6</sup>

As we shall find, there are students of Dionysius who would not resent this conclusion. It has been the custom, however, since the three ways were first set out by those whom we now call Middle Platonists,<sup>7</sup> for pious philosophers to insist that God is ‘no thing’ because he transcends every attribute that can be named, whereas matter is nothing, or very close to nothing, because it lacks every attribute. In the Dionysian corpus that transcendence is indicated by the addition of the prefix *hyper-* to every noun or epithet which is applied with honour to beings in this world. The implication that matter is below all being (in Greek a *hypokeimenon*, or substrate) is universally accepted by those who have any place for matter, whereas the claim that God is ‘beyond being’ may not be easily reconciled with his own proclamation, at least in the Greek of Genesis 3:14, that the meaning of his name Yahweh is “he who is.” From this it might be inferred to be hyper-good or hyper-wise is not to be wholly removed from the realm of being and hence not wholly removed from the realm of predication. Even Eckhart, seldom accused of underestimating the sublimity of God, declares in his commentary on Exodus that rather than being superior to these attributes, God possesses them in a superlative degree.<sup>8</sup>

This is as much as to say that the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae* coincide. One obvious objection would be that if we reduced the two paths to quantitative expressions, the *via eminentiae* would be an ascent to infinity while the *via negativa* would be a descent to zero; and although it is true that both zero and infinity are ciphers rather than numbers, they are not interchangeable. And yet it is true as a matter of fact that infinity is introduced by Plotinus into the intellectual realm,<sup>9</sup> while Émile Bréhier opines that if the Greeks had had a symbol for zero, Plotinus could have avoided the misleading use of “One.”<sup>10</sup> Zero and infinity have in common that they that, while each is a negation of any finite number, each is implied by the very existence of number, and arithmetic is impossible without the concept of them even in cultures that lack a sign for either. In Christian thought a similar role is assigned to being, considered as absolute or indeterminate, in contradistinction both to all concrete entities and to any definable essence. Being, on this account, remains a predicate, but a predicate of a very peculiar character: where the essence of an entity, so long as it exists, is to be a thing of this or that kind, God is no concrete entity, no finite being, no thing of any kind, but that one subject of discourse whose essence is simply to exist.

<sup>6</sup> On philosophic interpretations of Exodus 3:14 see Pattison, *God and Being*, 17–21.

<sup>7</sup> Origenes, *Cels.* 7.41; Alcinous, *Didascalicus* 10.5–6, both discussed by John M. Dillon (*Alcinous*, 107–110).

<sup>8</sup> Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus* 74–78 (CWS, 68–70).

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.4.3. See further de Vogel, “La théorie de l’AITEIPON,” 390.

<sup>10</sup> Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 157.

## 2. The Way to the One in Plotinus

As E.R. Dodds observed,<sup>11</sup> the hallmark of Neoplatonism, in contrast to every previous school of thought that stemmed from Plato, is the positing of the One as the ineffable source all that exists, including the forms or archetypes of all phenomenal being and the transcendent intellect that contemplates them. The reasoning which led Plotinus to this innovation was partly exegetic and partly speculative. The text to which he and his successors return most frequently in their exegesis is the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, in which the great philosopher purports to show that, if the One exists we can predicate of it neither an attribute nor the contrary of that attribute.<sup>12</sup> The second hypothesis argues that if the One exists we can predicate of it not only attributes but their contraries.<sup>13</sup> Whether or not it was Plato's intention to propound a serious thesis, the Neoplatonists understood this One which admits no predicates to be not only the originating principle of all things but the end for which they existed, otherwise called the Good; the One of the second hypothesis was usually identified with the intelligible realm of some portion of it.<sup>14</sup> This reading of Plato is not corroborated, at least on the surface, by the *Philebus*,<sup>15</sup> in which Socrates finds that neither the One nor the Many can be identified with the Good, but it finds support in sporadic accounts of Plato's unwritten teaching, in which he is said to have postulated the One, the principle of determination, as the first cause and the Indefinite dyad, the source of indeterminacy, as the second.<sup>16</sup> There is clearly some relation (although we cannot be sure which is prior) between this doctrine and the theory attributed to the Pythagoreans, in which number flows from the monad and dyad, the monad itself being superior to number, while spatial existence flows from the point by way of the line, the plane and the solid, the point being that which because it has no dimension occupies no space, and is therefore arguably nothing.<sup>17</sup> Thus the Pythagoreans arrive by another path at Parmenides' conclusion that there is nothing to be said about the One.

The speculative foundation for the Neoplatonic doctrine of the One is the notorious opinion of Plotinus that the intelligibles are not outside the intellect.<sup>18</sup> This was his solution to the problem which arose for Plato's disciples from his habit of investigating one question at a time and through the mouths of dissonant speakers. In the *Timaeus* the Demiurge rules the other gods, yet does not create the paradigm

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<sup>11</sup> Dodds, "Parmenides of Plato."

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Parmenides* 137c–142a.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Parmenides* 142a–155e.

<sup>14</sup> See further Morrow – Dillon, *Plato's Parmenides*, xxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> On the difficulties of this dialogue see Dancy, "The Limits of Being."

<sup>16</sup> See Krämer, "Plato's Unwritten Doctrines."

<sup>17</sup> See Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.23.1–3; also 6.14, 5.9 and 4.51, with Whittaker, "Neopythagoreanism," 118.

<sup>18</sup> On Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.5 see Armstrong, "The Background."

which he copies; in the *Republic* the mind of God contains the forms (or at least the forms of artefacts), but the sovereign and source of all things in existence is the Good, to which no personal attributes can be accorded.<sup>19</sup> What then is the relation between the Good, the forms and the deity to whom some personal traits are accorded in both these dialogues? Numenius, writing two or three generations before Plotinus, sets the Good above the demiurge intellect, while the location of the forms remains obscure.<sup>20</sup> His contemporary Atticus appears, in Eusebius' excerpts from his work, to hold that the forms are *noêmata* or thoughts of the Demiurge, although Proclus understands them as products rather than as objects or contents of his meditation.<sup>21</sup> The *Handbook* of Alcinous, a work of uncertain date whose author may be more an expositor than a follower of Plato, unambiguously makes the forms in the intellect of the Demiurge, though scholars may differ as to whether he takes this intellect to be the highest.<sup>22</sup> By contrast Longinus, a learned contemporary of Plotinus, held that Plato clearly believed the forms to be external to the beholder. Plotinus, who judged Longinus to be a philologist but no philosopher, follows Aristotle in construing knowledge to be an embracing of the form of the object by the intellect.<sup>23</sup> In everyday perception, the form is abstracted from the object by the mind of the percipient; the demiurge however, differs from ordinary percipients, as his objects differ from ordinary percept, in being wholly immaterial, and therefore devoid of all potentiality. The embracing of the transcendent form by the Demiurgic To be above thought is thus to be above every concept and thus above predication; does to be "beyond *ousia*" mean to be above every mode of finite being, every existence as a "this or that," or also above whatever we might call being in its absolute and nakedly existential sense, which some would call "being-itself"? There is much doubt as to whether Plotinus himself could have put this question. The Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* contends that *esti*, "it is" must always imply a predicate or a complement "it is X (and hence not Y)" or "it is an X (and hence not a Y),"<sup>24</sup> and a famous series of studies by Charles H. Kahn concludes that existence never emerged as a distinct concept in Greek thought, and that even instances of the verb *esti* which we render as "it exists" are not so much absolute as incomplete, implying always, when the context is considered, that the subject of the verb exists as a thing of a certain kind.<sup>25</sup> When this claim is challenged, it is often by the claim to have discovered the first occasion of the existential use in an author who has been

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Tim.* 31a11; Plato, *Resp.* 597b11, 509b14.

<sup>20</sup> For a survey of theories see F. Ferrari, "Numenius von Apamea," 654–655.

<sup>21</sup> Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 15.13; Proclus, *Comm. Tim.* (Diehl III, 234.8–238.3).

<sup>22</sup> On the Ideas as thoughts of God in Alcinous, *Didascalicus* 9 see Dillon – Tolan, "The Ideas," 43–45.

<sup>23</sup> See Porphyrius, *Vit. Plot.* 20.86–104 with Männlein-Robert, "Longinos und Amelios," 1314–1315.

<sup>24</sup> See Plato, *Soph.* 236–239 with Pedro Mesquita, "Plato's Eleaticism."

<sup>25</sup> Kahn, "Why Existence Does Not Emerged."

overlooked in the scholarly tradition.<sup>26</sup> Plotinus, who denies that all finite being comes under one genus,<sup>27</sup> might have agreed, for all we know, with Immanuel Kant's much-debated assertion that "exists" is not a predicate; for all that, distinguished scholars have thought it reasonable to ask whether, if the question were put to him in a suitably rigorous form, he would have replied that the one exists, or is existence, or protest that it transcends any possible meaning of the verb *einai*. What would he have made, we may ask, of the Christian tradition, which, bound as it was to the biblical revelation of God as "he who is," arrived at a definition of God as "that being whose existence is identical with his essence," or in plainer terms "that being whose only predicate is to be."

This is the opinion of Lloyd Gerson, who has argued in a number of books and articles that the One in Plotinus is characterized above all by its simplicity, which Plotinus regards as the necessary ground of all composite being.<sup>28</sup> To be simple is not to admit of any distinctions, not even the distinction of subject and predicate: consequently the One (as we must call it, lest we be silent) is, properly speaking, not even one. This thesis bequeathed many difficulties to those who had followed his reasoning so far – how do beings participate in unity if the One is so simple as not to have this as a predicate? How can the One be a cause if it is unrelated to anything?<sup>29</sup> – but the problem as to whether the One exists was not among them, as is evident at more than one place in the *Enneads* where Plotinus is expressing himself with the utmost circumspection. Thus, in *Enneads* 6.8, his most tenacious examination of the dictum that the One is beyond *ousia*, he proposes that, as cause of itself, it has its own *energeia*, which furnishes it, as it were with a hypostasis, which we might translate "reality" or "existence."<sup>30</sup> Among all possible subjects of the verb *esti*, this is the one that is only and really itself, and not at the same time something else; it is, he continues, *autoousia*, "*ousia* itself," and in another treatise "one being" (*hen on*) though not first being (*proton on*).<sup>31</sup> So far is he from denying the existence of the One that he endows it with personal attributes that are manifestly foreign to the Good as Plato posits it at *Republic* 509b.<sup>32</sup> As John M. Rist observes, anticipating Gerson, Plotinus is as ready to style the One *theos* as to aver that it is "above *theos*," and he sees at times to approach the distinction that Origen draws, as a gloss on John 1:1, between

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Dillon, *Dexippus*, 71; Krausmüller, "Theology and Philosophy."

<sup>27</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.2.1.23–24; but cf. 6.2.7.16, where the admission that being is in some sense a genus leads to the postulation of the One.

<sup>28</sup> Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 303, citing Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.4.1.

<sup>29</sup> Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 100 and 105.

<sup>30</sup> On the important distinction between *energeia* of the *ousia* and *energeia* from the *ousia* see Gerson, "Plato's Metaphysics," 556, quoting Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.4.2.27–39. It is not clear to me, however, that the term *ousia* is here applied directly to the One.

<sup>31</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8.12.14–17 and 6.6.13.49–63, both quoted by Gerson ("Plotinus' Metaphysics," 570).

<sup>32</sup> Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 95, citing Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1.8.1–5 at n. 6.



the Father as *ho theos*, God in himself, and the Son as *theos*, God by derivation.<sup>33</sup> It may not be irrelevant to add that Christian authors often spoke of God as a monad with the Pythagorean caveat that the monad is the source of the series of integers rather than part of it, and that while they might speak of the Father as “first God” and the Son as “second god,” they seldom employ these terms in apposition. We do not, for all that, deny that the God early church is personal, let alone that he exists.

This argument could be saved from the charge of inconsistency if we grant that “exists” is not a predicate, or at least not a predicate like any other. At the same time, we must remember that not every scholar believes that these ruminations could be translated into the Greek that Plotinus spoke. If by “beyond *ousia*” he understands “beyond all qualified or determinate existence,” would there in his own idiom any mode of existence that is not transcended by the One? Are we sure that even the wariest of his formulations is not an accommodation to the necessary imprecision of speech? Or might we not wish to say that whatever reality or truth he associates with the One is not properly conveyed by the verb “to exist,” just as we might want to say numbers have a reality or that statements about them are true without affirming that they exist? Plotinus suggests at *Enneads* 6.8.20.9–10 that the One is *energeia* without *ousia*,<sup>34</sup> and we should hesitate to conceive it as an entity with which Plotinus seeks a union comparable to the union of a Christian mystic with God.<sup>35</sup> Plotinus himself does not speak of *henôsis* with anything higher than intellect, and the nature of the absolute *henôsis* which takes the self beyond that union may be better conveyed by Mackenna’s consistent translation of *to hen* as “unity.”<sup>36</sup>

I shall not undertake a detailed critique of Gerson, as it would be only a pale foreshadowing of that of Eric D. Perl, which I shall examine in the next section of this paper. Since, however, Perl quotes sentences more often than paragraphs, I shall notice here one longer passage, which seems to me to militate strongly against the claim that Plotinus, at his most technical, can coherently grant existence to the One:

And perhaps one ought to suppose that it was in this sense that the ancients used the phrase “beyond [the] *ousia*”, to mean not merely that he generates *ousia*, but that he is no slave either to *ousia* or to himself, nor is his *ousia* its origin, but he himself, being the origin of [the] *ousia*, did not make [the] *ousia* for himself, but having made this thrust it outside him, as having no need of being because he was the one who made it. It is not indeed insofar as he is that he makes to be.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Rist, “Theos and the One,” 177–180.

<sup>34</sup> Noted by Gerson (“Plotinus’ Metaphysics,” 569).

<sup>35</sup> See Edwards, “Plotinus,” 13–28.

<sup>36</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*.

<sup>37</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8.19.13–20.

I have noted in square brackets every occurrence of the definite article before *ousia*, since it might be argued that this is a way of denoting one *ousia* in particular rather than *ousia* in general. The fact that Plotinus himself inserts the article into his allusion to Plato might be thought significant; on the other hand, the paragraph makes equal or better sense if we took *ousia* to mean “existence” in the abstract sense, remembering that it is customary in Greek, though not in English, to place the definite article before abstract nouns. If Plotinus is speaking of a particular *ousia*, it can be only that of the One, yet it is plain enough that whatever *ousia* he has in mind is external to the One.

Here then is an argument that seems to entail that the One is above all being. There is, however, one curiosity of diction which should give us pause – the repeated use of masculine rather than neuter pronouns for the One, which I have reproduced in my translation by writing “he” rather than “it.” It is possible that this usage betrays a religious inclination which is at odds with the austere metaphysical reasoning of Plotinus. If that is so, we may diagnose a latent ambiguity in the *Enneads*; we shall see, however, that of Eric Perl is correct in his understanding of both authors, the dissonance between the professed Christianity of Dionysius and his negative theology is so obvious and so radical that it cannot have been unperceived, and may not have been undesigned.

### 3. Dionysian Atheism?

If it were true, as Michael Frede avers, that ‘there is nothing impersonal about ... the God of Plotinus,’<sup>38</sup> we could say no less of the God of Dionysius. Conversely, if we refuse to grant even existence to the One, we may also follow Dean Inge in finding an “Oriental” void in Dionysius where a true Christian would have placed the loving Creator. And this is indeed the thesis of Eric Perl, a stringent critic of every emollient to the hard saying that the One is “beyond *ousia*.” Dionysius, in his view, is a Platonist in the same mould, who denudes the first principle of all predicates, existence included, and hence cannot even be rightly described as a theist. Taking up from Kahn the position that “being” in Greek is always synonymous with finite being, he produces a cluster of passages from the *Enneads* to show that the one neither is nor possesses finite being, has neither form nor limit, and is not one of a class to be differentiated from the rest by any determinate property. In answer to the suggestion that its very infinity or indeterminacy is that property, he replies that for Plotinus, as for all Greeks, “infinite being” would be a contradiction in terms.<sup>39</sup> Even to style

<sup>38</sup> Frede, “Monotheism,” 48.

<sup>39</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 11–12.

the One a cause is, on his own showing, to speak in relation not the One but to us (*Enneads* 6.9.3.49–52); even the designation of it as ‘One’ is a denial of multiplicity rather than an assertion of unity (5.5.6.26–27), and may indeed have been given to us only to be negated when we reach the end of ratiocination (5.5.6.31–34). To be above all finite being is to have no being to which the Greek language can give expression, and if we are to apprehend it at all, it will be by ceasing to exercise thought (5.3.13.32–33).<sup>40</sup>

Perl, of course, is familiar with the argument that even if we cannot affirm existence of the One, we can affirm, as a true proposition, that it is the cause of whatever exists. Gerson indeed contends that biblical creation and Platonic emanation differ more in words than in substance.<sup>41</sup> Perl agrees, but only because, in contrast to Gerson, he attenuate the notion of cause to preclude all action on the part of the One. Causation in Plotinus and his successors, he maintains, is nothing more than participation of all things in the first principle; each is determined by its mode of participation, but the One does not stand to them as producer to product.<sup>42</sup> It is nothing more or less than production itself, and when we speak of procession and reversion, these are not discrete operations but two names for the individuation of the existent, one of which conceives unity as the source, and the other as the end, of its being as the entity that it is.<sup>43</sup> To say that the one is separate or transcendent is to say that it is unconditioned, not that it has some being which is external to its products; as Proclus says, it is at the same time everywhere and nowhere. When we turn to Dionysius, Perl continues, we find that the creative operation of God is equally immanent and equally transcendent in the sense that it is unconditioned and not to be identified with any finite activity. It is not to be imagined as an act of will by which a lone agent brings into existence that which was hitherto non-existent.<sup>44</sup> Even when it is described as *eros* or love – a linguistic innovation, as Perl admits – no more is meant than Plotinus means when he speaks of the One as that which provides for all things.<sup>45</sup> The apophatic philosophy of Dionysius is not an interpretation but a resolute correction of the anthropomorphic vocabulary of the scriptures.

While I share Perl’s opinion that the logic of negation in Plotinus requires us to read his predicative statements as accommodations to our weak capacities, I wonder why Dionysius, had he shared this view, would have chosen to ground his theology on a book so full of anthropomorphic elements as the Bible, construing it not as a philosophic text but as the manual of a church in which the duty of the wise was to guide the simple, and in which custom permitted neither the wise nor the simple

<sup>40</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 12–13.

<sup>41</sup> Gerson, “Plotinus’ Metaphysics”; Perl, *Theophany*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 19 and 38.

<sup>44</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 29, quoting *Divine Names* 5.8, 824c. Cf. Perl, *Theophany*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, 48–49.

to deny the truth of any part of the text or even to bury the literal sense entirely in figurative exegesis. Plato had set the example of disbelieving the tales of poets and had made it clear that his own myths were to be understood allegorically; for his students in late antiquity the negative way of speaking about the first principle was so obviously the better one that the only danger to be apprehended was that a novice might imagine that the One is really one, and that the apophatic caveats which are attached to every description of it were real propositions conveying its attributes.<sup>46</sup> Dionysius, by contrast, maintains that it is the very unknowability of God that necessitates the kataphatic revelation: as Kant might have said, the negation is empty without the predication, and without negation predication is blind.

Since Clement of Alexandria it had been a Christian truism that God is known as he chooses to be known and that only the advent of the Word in flesh, as attested in scripture, can put to rest the cacophony of the schools.<sup>47</sup> Clement, Origen and their intellectual heirs abandon the literal sense when reason proves it untenable, but not for one that deprives God of rational motive in his choice of human words. Christ would not be called the Son of God if he were not divine by nature; God would not be said to love the world if he were not in some sense possessed of mind and will. In exegesis the *via analogiae* is a corollary of the infallible truth of the prophets, the law and the gospel. Dionysius' belief in the reality of the incarnation was never doubted before the modern era, even by those who suspected him of heresy,<sup>48</sup> and his reverence for the scriptures exceeds the fidelity of the Platonist to his master, for even the most infatuated votary of Plato holds that his arguments can be proved by impartial reasoning, whereas the Christian doctrine of scriptural inerrancy requires that much be accepted in faith that eludes or even defies the intellect. It is hard to see how Dionysius could subscribe (as he clearly does) to such a tradition if he did not think of God as a being who is capable of acting with design.

His devotion to scripture accounts for a number of elements in the thought of Dionysius which would strike us as incongruous in the works of a pagan Platonist, for whom the first principle can have no being, no cult, no love and no local presence in this world:

1. Although he sets God above being, Dionysius has not forgotten that the name under which he disclosed himself to Moses at Exodus 3:14 is rendered in the Greek text as "he who is."<sup>49</sup> While scholars are quick to note that both he borrows from Proclus the trope of coupling the prefix *hyper-* with every adjective or noun that he attaches to the first principle, they pay much less attention to his adoption and

<sup>46</sup> Proclus, *Theologia platonica* 2.10. (Saffrey – Westerink, II, 63.23–27).

<sup>47</sup> On the possibility that God is above all being in Clement (especially at *Paed.* 1.7.1.1, where he is above the Monad), see Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 173–179.

<sup>48</sup> See Perczel, "Greco-Syriac Reception."

<sup>49</sup> Exodus 3:14 is quoted by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 1.6, 596B; 2.1, 637A etc. Cf. e.g. Clement, *Strom.* 6.173.3.

multiplication of terms which carry the prefix *auto*. These, as I have noted elsewhere, pertain in Proclus “exclusively to the noetic realm,” so that “even the *autoen*, the one-itself, is the henad, not the imparticipable One.”<sup>50</sup> By contrast:<sup>51</sup>

In Dionysius compounds of *auto*-, no less than compounds of *hyper*, are a monopoly of God as first principle.<sup>52</sup> Some twenty-four of these are enumerated in the index to Heil and Ritter, of which one, *autotheos*, appears to be Origen’s neologism, while *autoaiôn* may be a Dionysian addition to the language.<sup>53</sup> Yet even the most frequent, *autokinêtos*, appears only seven times, and more than half (thirteen) are represented only by a single instance. In Proclus the compounds of *auto* exceed the compounds of *hyper* in frequency and variety; in Dionysius the reverse is true because it is *hyper*- which best conveys the strict alterity – that is, the absolute rather than paradigmatic status – of the Creator. At least two of his inventions – *autohyperousios* and *autohyperagathotês* – attach the prefix *auto*- to terms which signify transcendence, and of which there can therefore be no paradigm.

We need not wonder, then, that Dionysius has been accused of conflating the first two antinomies of the *Parmenides*, the first of which states that “if the One is, nothing is,” and the second that “if the one is, everything is.”<sup>54</sup> For Proclus this would be impossible, as it would mean that the One has properties – and indeed those very properties which belong eminently, if not uniquely, to *nous*.

2. The God of Dionysius, being the god of the Bible, is the sole object of worship, whereas worship in Neoplatonism is offered to every divinity but the highest. The *Mystical Theology* begins with a prayer to the supereminent Trinity;<sup>55</sup> the coda to the *Divine Names* is an expression of the author’s desire to please God, while the *Eccelesiastical Hierarchy* is punctuated by references to liturgical invocations. Plotinus, to the astonishment of his disciples, worshipped nothing, but even the devout Proclus, when he imagines the intellect catching sight of the One like the rising sun, enjoins us “as it were, to salute it with a hymn.”<sup>56</sup> Proclus, so far as is known, did not compose a hymn to the One.

3. The attribution of *eros* to God in Dionysius cannot be passed over lightly, for none of his Christian predecessors had so profoundly subverted Plato’s assumption that *eros* is always a symptom of need. It follows for Plato and most of his successors that the higher can feel no *eros* for the lower; only in Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Alcibiades* – only, that is, in one short work of his among many of greater

<sup>50</sup> See Proclus, *Elements of Theology* 114 and 128.

<sup>51</sup> Edwards, “Dionysius the Areopagite,” 613.

<sup>52</sup> Heil – Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, II, 185–186.

<sup>53</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 189.17 (Suchla).

<sup>54</sup> Corsini, *Il trattato De Divinis Nominibus*.

<sup>55</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 997A (Luibheid, 135).

<sup>56</sup> Porphyrius, *Vit. Plot.* 10.45; Proclus, *Theologia platonica* 2.11 (Saffrey – Westerink II, 65.5–6).

length and intellectual compass – do we read that the approach of Socrates to Alcibiades symbolizes the condescension of the divine to our mortal intelligence.<sup>57</sup> Origen and Gregory of Nyssa have no difficulty in crediting God with *eros*, but in their writings on the Song of Songs this term denotes the incandescent longing of the soul for its heavenly spouse.<sup>58</sup> Only in Dionysius is *eros* represented exclusively as a activity of God, as though the paradigmatic use of the term connoted not deficiency but superabundance; when he quotes Ignatius' saying "my *eros* is crucified," by which the martyr surely meant "my love of the world has been put to death," he understands *Eros* as a name for Christ.<sup>59</sup>

4. It need hardly be pointed out that when he thrusts this inspired misreading upon Ignatius, Dionysius is violating more than one axiom of Neoplatonic thought. Plotinus and Proclus cannot conceive of any descent for the higher plane to the lower that does not entail some loss to the one who descends; and even if they could admit this, it would not be by allowing the one who descends to exist without division on both planes at the same time. Yet Dionysius stands out even among his fellow-Christian in his willingness to affirm at once the humanity of the Word and the divinity of the man Jesus. The modern theologian, for whom the incarnation is primarily (if not solely) God's self-emptying and assumption of human frailty, is disappointed to read in *Letter 4* that even the human works of Christ were performed in a superhuman manner;<sup>60</sup> but this is only the author's way of saying, as the Chalcedonian Definition required, that he was one person and not two, and thus that all his human acts were acts of God. The cry of docetism is, as usual, anachronistic, for in early Christian parlance this term signifies not the denial of imperfection or infirmity but the denial that God the Word had become a second Adam in spirit, soul and flesh.

To be, to be worshipped, to love and to be knowable as a person are all traits of God as this name is used in the Christian tradition. It is often assumed that they do not sit well with an apophatic theology, yet it might be maintained that they are the logical consequences of raising God above knowledge. It is common for human societies to pay solemn devotions to powers of whom they know little, and while it may sound like a truism to say that we cannot love unless we know what we love, the mediaeval successors of Dionysius teach that when reason has reached its limit love succeeds it as the sole ground of communion with the Inapprehensible.<sup>61</sup>

57 Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* (Segonds, I, 55.14–15).

58 Origenes, *Comm. Cant.*, proem 19–40; Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum* 1.24–27; Limone, "The Desire."

59 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 4.12, 709B; Ignatius, *Romans* 7.2. Cf. Origenes, *Comm. Cant.*, proem 36.

60 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Epistola 4* (PG 3, 1072B–C). For bibliography see T. Hainthaler et al, *Christ in the Christian Tradition*, 333–336.

61 See e.g. Thomas Gallus, *Commentaire*.

We may urge that, since we must be persons before we can have knowledge, there is nothing more apprehensible than personhood; yet we might invoke the same premiss to show that, our sense of personhood cannot be an object of knowledge for us if all our knowledge presupposes it. Gregory of Nyssa, the first Christian to affirm that God is infinite,<sup>62</sup> assures us that thus does not prevent our knowing him any more than the unfathomability of the human mind precludes self-knowledge. Vladimir Lossky extends this reasoning from the essence of the Godhead to the three persons, maintaining that the “irreducibility of a hypostasis to its essence” which is implied in the theological use of the term is also implicit in our understanding of ourselves as persons, which could not be replaced by the most exhaustive enumeration of our attributes.<sup>63</sup> It may be that beneath all expressible knowledge there is a bedrock of knowledge that defies expression; if this is true it will not be true, without qualification, that the knowable is coterminous with that which can be expressed. And thus we come to Timothy D. Knepper’s thesis that apophaticism is bound to be incoherent until it defines a sense in which the unknowability of God is an item of knowledge for one who is not an atheist.

#### 4. Adventures in Epistemology

Timothy Knepper’s contestation of the standard reading of Dionysius is not inspired by the theories of Lloyd Gerson, and his presuppositions are largely consonant with those of Perl.<sup>64</sup> He does not deny that the God of the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* is beyond being and hence beyond speech, but he denies that he denies that these works, as we commonly interpret them, are able to express this thesis without contradicting themselves by the very fact of expressing it. Reference to Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* is sufficient, in his view, to show that the prefix *huper* raises God above every predicate to which it is attached by Dionysius; and he does not seem to doubt that to be *huperousios* is to exceed every possible definition of being. The very use of such terms, however, creates a language in which to speak of God and thus subverts the assertion of his ineffability. The use of the term *apophatikos* to characterize this mode of speaking implies that the theologian needs a special idiom, rather than that no idiom is available to him: it may be for this reason that Dionysius makes much frequent use of the term *aphairesis*, or diremption,<sup>65</sup> which describes the process of stripping away the elements of common speech and

<sup>62</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium* (GNO 1, 281.24 and 2, 226.29).

<sup>63</sup> Edwards, “Three Theologians,” 589–592.

<sup>64</sup> Knepper, “Techniques and Rules,” 3–31.

<sup>65</sup> Knepper, “Techniques and Rules,” 7–9.

thought without implying that any positive affirmation will replace them. If our language will not supply us with adequate terms to speak of God, the assertion that God is ineffable cannot be adequately formulated in that language. As he transcends every predicate, so language must be transcended before we can apprehend him as the being for whom our language has no terms.<sup>66</sup> In short, we must not treat Dionysius as a theorist of religious language, but take seriously his exhortation to enter into the darkness of unknowing – at which point there is indeed nothing to be said.

As Knepper's quotations show, he does not accuse Dionysius himself of an ingenuous substitution of negation for affirmation. He sees that the famous passage of the *Mystical Theology* which denies to God both the positives and the negatives in a series of paired antonyms, including the antonyms "being" and "non-being," implies that in using such terms of God we are guilty not so much of falsehood as of a category mistake. As our analytical philosophers argue, the statement that virtue is easy is false, but the statement that virtue is yellow is neither false nor true, but senseless. Dionysius knows, though he does not say as clearly as Proclus, that apophatic propositions do not constitute an alternative discourse that is truer than the cataphatic. At the same time, he had inherited from the Athenian school another way of speaking about the first principle which, common as it, may not be readily definable as cataphatic, apophatic or even analogical. That which we style the Good or the One, says Proclus (after Plotinus), exhibits these properties only in being the cause of goodness and unity in everything that exists, and may therefore be known by its effects while remaining in itself unknowable. The same would be true of every other predicate that we accord to it: might we not find in causality, therefore, the means of making God the subject of an intelligible sentence without pretending that he himself can be brought within the compass of the intellect?

The Cappadocian Fathers appear to have taken this position before Dionysius when they argued against Eunomius that on the one hand a negative term such as 'ingenerate' does not define an essence, and on the other that the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by no other properties than the relation of the cause to that which he causes.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, they do not furnish Dionysius with a model, because the Father's causal act within the Trinity consists in the imparting of his *ousia* or essence to the Son and the Spirit. Inexpressible as the shared nature of the three persons may be, there is such a nature according to the Cappadocians;<sup>68</sup> if the Dionysian God is beyond *ousia*, we cannot say that he imparts his own qualities to that which he brings into being. If we assert instead (as the Cappadocians would not be afraid to do) that he brings all things into existence by his will, we endow him with

<sup>66</sup> Knepper, "Techniques and Rules," 14–15.

<sup>67</sup> See Radde-Gallwitz, *Doctrinal Works*, 129–163.

<sup>68</sup> See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ad Ablabium* 6–10 (Moreschini, 1918–1922). I do not know what significance should be attached to Gregory's use of *phusis* in preference to *ousia*.



the faculty of volition and thus deprive him of the perfect simplicity that Plotinus ascribed to the One. Where there is both a willer and a will, there is distinction, and distinction cannot be expressed without predication. If God indeed is able to will each thing in its singularity, and not only existence in general, we must attribute to him an indefinite number of discrete acts of willing, and he will no longer be the One of the first hypotheses in the *Parmenides* of Plato, but of the second, of whom it is said that “if he is, then everything is.”

### Concluding Observations

Ontology, the study of that which exists, is not easily divorced from epistemology, the study of that which is known; there are many who believe that they are the same science. Parmenides held that that which is not cannot be even an object of thought;<sup>69</sup> and conversely both Plotinus and Origen take the Platonic maxim that the Good is beyond *ousia* to imply that is beyond thought or intellect.<sup>70</sup> In Gerson’s view the Good is not thereby removed from the sphere of ontology, and if it can be defined as that whose essence is to exist it must be in some sense an object of knowledge.<sup>71</sup> For Perl it appears neither an object of knowledge nor an existent, but for Knepper the impossibility of bringing it within any current ontology or epistemology does not preclude the apprehension of it on a higher plane of knowledge. Whether this involves the occupation of higher plane of being remains uncertain so long as his argument turns primarily on the question of what can be said, which for some schools of philosophy in the modern world is no longer a question either of ‘what there is’ or of what can be known. These schools may be legitimately invoked in the criticism of Dionysius; they cannot afford any key to the understanding of him, as some have sought in Hegel a key to Plato or in Heidegger a key to Nagarjuna (who is no surely Dean Inge’s type of the “Oriental”).<sup>72</sup> He is not, for example, anticipating Derrida in denying the power of a sign to signify anything but a sign. He could not have escaped the difficulty of aligning the signifier with the signified by adopting Ludwig Wittgenstein’s maxim that the meaning of a word is its use, for the common use of words is, in his view, that which cannot be our guide to the reading of scripture, while the vocabulary that he himself employed for its decipherment is an arsenal of private neologisms to which a Wittgensteinian might be reluctant to grant the status of language. How then could he hope to be understood if he could rely neither on the conventions of everyday

<sup>69</sup> Graham, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 212–218.

<sup>70</sup> Origenes, *Cels.* 7.38; Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1.8.6; Whittaker, “ΕΠΕΚΕΙΝΑ ΝΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ.”

<sup>71</sup> Gerson, *Plotinus*, 15–16.

<sup>72</sup> Sinari, “Experience of Nothingness.”

speech nor on a public familiarity with the encoded truths of scripture that would spare him the labour of putting them into words?

Christian thought has recognised two ways of advancing from the mere premonition of higher truths to immediate knowledge of them, one of which we may call eschatological and the other mystical. The eschatological transition takes place only with our entrance into the kingdom, which is made possible only by death or the end of the world. Assuming that he would experience the latter before the former, Paul foretold that he would see face to face the one whom he had hitherto perceived darkly, as in a mirror (1 Cor 3:12); John, his fellow-apostle, proclaimed that “when Christ appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:3). Origen surmised that the soul, when parted from the body, will rise through the planetary orbits, growing in knowledge of the cosmos and its own place in it, until it attains the summit of contemplation, where God will be its all in all. Philosophers of more recent times have maintained that only the afterlife will enable us to meet the demands of the verification principle,<sup>73</sup> or (in the older words of Immanuel Kant) to possess as constitutive objects of knowledge the preconceptions that furnish us with a basis for conduct in the present world.<sup>74</sup>

The mystical way, before the twentieth century at least, was not an alternative to the eschatological way but a foretaste of it. Origen, basing his theory on the homonymy of the “outer man” and the “inner man,” argues that when the scriptures exhort us to taste or see or hear the Lord they are appealing to our spiritual senses;<sup>75</sup> conversely, it is by exercising these senses that we grasp the spiritual sense of scripture. Gregory of Nyssa, expanding these laconic intimations, conceives the life of faith as one of perpetual advance from glory to glory, commencing even in this life as the increase of wisdom promotes, and in turn is promoted by, our increasing likeness to God.<sup>76</sup> The mediaeval church produced a copious literature on the cultivation of faculties other than intellect as a means to the knowledge of God: some authors enjoin little more than the rational fostering of love until love at last eclipses reason, while others explain in detail how the capacities of the soul are converted into their spiritual counterparts.<sup>77</sup> The wiser sort do not attempt to describe the transcendence of everyday consciousness, even by analogy, but content themselves with metaphors that give some notion of the heights to be scaled and the arduousness of the ascent.

Neither of these approaches satisfies the analytical philosopher, who assumes that all that is real can be captured in propositions grounded either in logical

<sup>73</sup> See e.g. Hick, “Theology and Verification.”

<sup>74</sup> Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. John A. Palmer (*Plato’s Reception of Parmenides*, 17–30) suggests that the young Plato looked to the afterlife to resolve the difficulties raised by Parmenides.

<sup>75</sup> On homonymy see *Origenes, Comm. Cant.*, proem 6; on spiritual senses Origenes, *Princ.* 1.1.9 etc., with McInroy, “Origen of Alexandria.”

<sup>76</sup> See von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 153–169.

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*.

necessity or in the evidence of the senses; abstruse as the terms composing these propositions may be, they purport to be clarifications of common speech, common observation or common values, rather than halting reports of experiences whose incommunicability is their sole content, or promissory notes for a verification in some unverifiable future. The most that the mystic or visionary can offer us, in the view of most analytical philosophers, is a record of the experience of an experience, which seldom achieves coherence in itself, let alone any claim to correspondence with the facts. A postmodernist or a Heideggerian might say as much of every exercise in the production or interpretation of signs, and if we turn from the European to the Asiatic tradition we shall find it to be a commonplace of Vedantic teaching that the ultimate object of experience is the Atman, or deepest self, while there are Buddhists (perhaps the majority) whose goal in meditation is the experience of nothing. This state, we are told, is sometimes declared by Nagarjuna to be “different from both being and non-Being,” so that we can say of it, in flat defiance of Parmenides that it is and is not.”<sup>78</sup>

Among Greeks we do not find this dictum even in Plotinus, who for good reasons is the philosopher most often compared with the commentators on Hindu or Buddhist scriptures, even when he is not suspected of learning from them. It is, however, a tenet of Dionysius that God is neither one of the things that are nor of those that are not (*Mystical Theology* 5, 1048A); and if this were the whole of his doctrine, those who deny that he is a Christian would be justified – and indeed there might be equal justification for denying that he is a Greek. Yet, as we have observed, he also believes that God is the author of the book that abounds in positive, if enigmatic, disclosures of his nature, and that this God is not only “the one who is” but the font of a universal and superabundant love on which the existence of all other things is grounded. He is both *hyperousios* and *autoousios*, at once beyond being and eminently being. The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and the *Celestial Hierarchy* are proof enough that the author has left the school of Proclus behind, even if that were not evident from his choice of the Bible rather than Plato as his oracle.<sup>79</sup> The harmonization of his Christianity with his philosophy of negation is not effected in the extant writings, where at best there are hints of both the eschatological and the mystical way. No doubt it was for this reason that for centuries he was seldom read without the apparatus of John of Scythopolis or Maximus the Confessor, who in taking his reasoning further can be said to have reclaimed him for the church.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Sinari (“Experienc of Nothingness,” 281) though he does not eat tis as characteristic utterance.

<sup>79</sup> The importance of these texts has been emphasized by Andrew Louth (*Denys the Areopagite*).

<sup>80</sup> See Rorem – Lamoureaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 36–39.

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## HOW NEGATIVE IS THE THEOLOGY OF DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE?

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# Negative Theology: Its Use and Christological Function in Late Antiquity and Subsequent Developments

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the historical development of negative theology from its formulations in early Christianity to its later forms in Medieval Neo-Platonism. First analyzing how in early Christian thought negative theology was often used for a Christological purpose, the article goes on to discuss the implications of the Neo-Platonic notion of God as beyond being. While primarily applying a historical methodology, the article concludes by encouraging a rediscovery of the Christological orientation for negative theology found in its early Christian formulations.

**Keywords:** negative theology, Christology, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Neo-Platonism

In simple terms, negative theology can be defined as any discourse that speaks indirectly about God by saying something about what God is not. More broadly, negative theology may be understood as any discourse that seeks to talk about God by “un-saying” the concept of God itself, as implied in the frequently used synonym “apophatic” theology.<sup>1</sup> To this extent, negative theology may be understood as a linguistic or epistemological phenomenon, since it says something about how theological language and thinking work, but it obviously also has ontological underpinnings that regulate its use. The oneness and infinity of God, for example, has often played an important role here, just as the more or less clear distinction between God and creation that runs through much of Jewish and Christian thought.<sup>2</sup>

While these connections between ontology and negative theology are rather rudimentary, what is just as important, are the purposes or intentions that guide the use of negative theological language.<sup>3</sup> If in general the meaning of words is determined by context, this is true in particular for a kind of language that by its use of negations speaks only indirectly about its object, its meaning being dependent on what it denies. Moreover, as we shall see in the following, for many authors in the tradition,

<sup>1</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, “Atheism,” 236.

negative theology was not applied for its own sake but was only instrumental in establishing a larger picture. Seemingly similar instances of negative theology cannot, for this reason, simply be taken out of context and compared as if they were just saying the same thing.

This should be kept in mind while contemplating the history of negative theology. According to a typical narrative, negative theology in its Christian forms was a product of the influence of Neo-Platonism upon Christian theology in the early Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> However, it is probably more accurate to say that there were parallel developments in late antiquity or even that negative theology developed in more complex conversations between Jewish, Christian and Neo-Platonic thought.<sup>5</sup> Recalling the eclectic milieu of 2nd century Alexandria, where much of negative theology originated, it should not be a surprise that negative theology does not depend on the principles of one philosophical school or religious tradition. By its very nature, negative theology cannot easily be defined or pinned down to a system of thought, but being always evasive and wary of definition, negative theology escapes any attempt at reducing it to a certain set of principles.

Nevertheless, it should be possible to formulate historical typologies of negative theology based on its use in different contexts. The following seeks to show how negative theology had a range of origins in late antiquity, but also that for early Christians, negative theology was, in many cases, applied for a primarily Christological purpose. With the development of Neo-Platonic forms of negative theology, a notion of God as beyond being or even “nothing” was introduced that gradually reshaped the original concerns of negative theology. While being far from a comprehensive overview of how negative theology developed, the following seeks to trace some of the differences between “classical” Patristic negative theology and its later forms. Along the way, the implications of negative theology for moral philosophy are discussed as well.

## 1. The Hidden God Revealed

While there may be a polygenesis of origins for negative theology as a philosophical discipline, at least one main root can be traced to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. There is no systematized negative theology here, but numerous statements do point to the strangeness and incomprehensibility of God. This is no place to list all biblical claims that may be taken as expressive of negative theology, but perhaps most important is the story of Moses who had to enter the “thick darkness” on Mount Sinai

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<sup>4</sup> Jünger, *God as the Mystery*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 10–11.

(Exod 20:21), a story that was often taken up in the subsequent tradition as containing profound philosophical insights into the ineffable and incomprehensible nature of God.

That Moses did not see the face of God, but only God's back, was taken by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC–50 AD) and early Christian apologists to express the fact that God is essentially ineffable, and can be known only by revelation through God's Logos. Philo, whom Andrew Louth called "the father of negative theology,"<sup>6</sup> argued that when God refers to himself as "the one who is" (ὁ ὢν) in the Septuagint translation (Exod 3:14), the point is that God as "being" (τὸ ὄν) surpasses human understanding.<sup>7</sup> God is not "beyond" being, as he would become in later negative theology, but, according to Philo, as absolutely the most fundamental being, God cannot be comprehended or put into words unless God reveals himself.<sup>8</sup>

Important is also the claim made in Isaiah about God who "hides himself" (Isa 45:15). This expression would become the basis for the notion of the "hidden God," the *Deus absconditus*, who is inaccessible to human thought and can as such only be known as revealed. Examples from the biblical wisdom literature may be added to this – the generally skeptical attitude of Ecclesiastes, or the Book of Job, when Elihu remarks poetically that "an awesome splendor surrounds God" and adds that "the Almighty is not to be found" (Job 37:22–23). The latter claim is paralleled in the New Testament, when God, in the First Epistle to Timothy, is said to dwell in an "inaccessible light" which "no human has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:10).

In most cases, the purpose or intention of such descriptions in biblical texts is not of a speculative nature.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, these types of statements about the inaccessibility of God are made so that human beings may stop their speculations and instead turn their attention to doing what is right. This is perhaps clearest in the First Epistle of John, where it is said that "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God remains in us, and His love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12). One can have no purely theoretical knowledge of God, but one knows God as one participates in the love of God in practice. This, of course, should not be confused with a post-Kantian anti-dogmatic pragmatism, recalling that the same epistle also has something positive to say about the divine nature of Christ (1 John 1:18). As it shall be demonstrated, the balance between a positive Christology and a healthy negative theology becomes important in subsequent orthodoxy.

It is not because negative theology does not also have precursors in Greek philosophy, but while Plato talked somewhat moderately about the difficulty of comprehending and communicating God to everyone, Philo, as famously argued by

<sup>6</sup> Louth, *The Origins*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Philo, *Mut.* 7–14.

<sup>8</sup> Philo, *Somn.* I, 184.

<sup>9</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 13.

Harry Wolfson, may very well have been the first to describe God in absolute terms as ineffable or *arrêtos*.<sup>10</sup> This notion of God's ineffability recurs in later Neo-Platonism, perhaps influenced by Philo, but it was already a basic theme in early Christian thought in the 2nd century.<sup>11</sup> Here, the essential ineffability and incomprehensibility of God served in the polemics against Pagan idolatry as a means of establishing the need for revelation if human beings are to know God. Fundamental to this concern was what Robert Sokolowski has called "the Christian distinction" between God and everything else, a distinction that runs through all concepts of God in early Christian thought.<sup>12</sup> Radicalizing themes from Philo, early Christians emphasized that God, being the creator of everything, is radically different from created being and as such incomprehensible to the human mind.

Of note is Justin Martyr (c. 100–165), who argued that God the Father, who is "ungenerate" (a term with somewhat philosophical connotations), does not have a name, since whoever names something is in some way the "elder" of what is named.<sup>13</sup> This "Philonic principle," as it has been called, clarifies that one only knows God as revealed.<sup>14</sup> Names like Father, God, Creator, Lord, and Master, are not really names for God, but words that are derived from the good works and functions of God (ἐκ τῶν εὐποιῶν καὶ τῶν ἔργων προσήσεις), argued Justin.<sup>15</sup> This is also the case for the name Christ, that while being a name for God's eternally begotten Son, still contains what Justin called an "unknown significance" (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν).<sup>16</sup> One only knows God as revealed through the Son.<sup>17</sup> In other words, there are clear limits to what one can know about God, but, in a dialectical manner, becoming aware of these limits is also what makes it possible to have some knowledge of God after all. It is, as argued by Tertullian (c. 155–220), our very inability to grasp God that gives human beings an idea of God, which is why God is known paradoxically as "at once known and unknown."<sup>18</sup>

Such notions of God's incomprehensibility were often applied for a polemical purpose. For example, in the *Epistle to Diognetus* it is made clear against the "philosophers" that no human being has seen God or made God known.<sup>19</sup> God is "invisible" which is for the author, as in the New Testament epistles quoted above, arguably a way of talking about God's general inaccessibility to the human mind. God has, however, been revealed through his Son. Faith in God through the Son is the medium, so to

10 Plato, *Tim.* 28c. Wolfson, *Philo*, 111.

11 Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 75.

12 Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.

13 Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,1.

14 Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 133.

15 Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,2.

16 Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,3.

17 Justin Martyr, *Ap.* 63.

18 Tertullianus, *Apol.* 17.

19 *Ad Diog.* 8,5–6.

speak, by which human beings can know God after all. A similar argument was made by Aristides of Athens (d. c. 134), who connected such claims to the notion described above, that God, as creator, is unrelated to anything created and, as such, can have no name.<sup>20</sup> As in the *Epistle to Diognetus* and earlier examples of a Christian use of negative theology, this again concludes in ethical claims about the purity and love that characterizes Christian relations based on faith rather than Pagan superstition.

## 2. Not Without the Wood of the Tree

The notion of God as essentially hidden and ineffable but revealed through his Logos in Christ, reappears in Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) at the verge of the 3rd century. It has sometimes been argued that Clement was the first Christian to apply negative theology systematically, in part because he derived his analytic methodology from Platonist philosophers such as Alcinous and Numenius.<sup>21</sup> Clement may also be an early example of how Plato's arguments about the infinity and incomprehensibility of the One, in the dialogue *Parmenides*, were translated into a theological context.<sup>22</sup> It should be clear, however, that while Clement may be said to anticipate developments in later Neo-Platonism, he usually does so to establish an argument similar to that made by other Christian apologists of his time.<sup>23</sup> The ineffability of God the Father is what makes necessary the revelation of God through the Logos. As Karl Barth argued in his *Church Dogmatics*, when God was considered incomprehensible by theologians such as Justin and Clement in the second century, the point was that human beings cannot exercise towards God the activity which characterizes human relations to other living creatures (Gen 2:19).<sup>24</sup> What can be learned from early Christian theology about the incomprehensibility and ineffability of God should be seen as expressive of the fact that God is neither the goal nor the origin of human speech, but that God by his revealed word has given human beings the capacity to speak about God.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, as Clement argued in the fifth book of the *Stromateis*, God the Father can only be known through the Son. The “grace of knowledge” is from God the Father through the Son.<sup>26</sup> This was the point when Moses begged God to show his glory (Exod 33:18) but learned that he could not see God face to face. God cannot

<sup>20</sup> Aristides, *Ap. Pr.*

<sup>21</sup> Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 75. Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 227–229.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 187.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,5.

be taught by human beings or expressed in speech, says Clement, but God can be known “only by His own power” (ἡ μόνῃ τῇ παρ’ αὐτοῦ δυνάμει), another way of saying that one only knows God through the revealed Logos. God is remote “in essence” (κατ’ οὐσίαν), but near in virtue of his power, says Clement elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> The Tree of Life allegorically depicts the Logos. As Clement poetically puts it, “It was not without the wood of the tree that He came to our knowledge. For our life was hung on it, in order that we might believe.” (ἐκρεμάσθη γὰρ ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν εἰς πίστιν ἡμῶν).<sup>28</sup> Even if one resists the temptation to see this as an obscure reference to the cross, it is clear that for Clement one only knows God through revelation.

When Clement at one point argues that human beings have “no natural relation”<sup>29</sup> (φυσικὴν σχέσιν) to God, this is obviously not to exclude the possibility of relating to God altogether, but neither is the point that one can only know God by dissolving all differences in a radically negative theology. The point, rather, is that it is through the Logos that one knows the otherwise unknown God. One knows the Father through the Son and vice versa, apprehending “the truth by the truth,” since the two go together.<sup>30</sup> Clement, again in the fifth book of the *Stromateis*, presents some important observations about how the process of abstraction (akin to Alcinous’) leads to a negatively defined knowledge of “the almighty,” knowing “not what He is, but what He is not” (οὐχ ὅ ἐστιν, ὃ δὲ μὴ ἐστι).<sup>31</sup> Although these claims may be read as standing on their own, they are arguably not unrelated to his subsequent claims, quoted above, about how Moses learned that “the grace of knowledge” about God is only through the Son.<sup>32</sup>

Although Clement, with his eclectic attitude, often makes dispersed and sometimes unrelated claims, his observations could plausibly be read as an argument about how negative theology culminates not in complete ignorance or silence, but in the revelation of God through the Logos. This is only made more plausible when Clement a little later on in the fifth book of the *Stromateis* argues how “the One” (τὸ ἓν) due to its indivisibility and infinity cannot be named, but then adds: “It remains that we understand, then, the Unknown, by divine grace, and by the Word alone that proceeds from Him.”<sup>33</sup> This is how Paul’s preaching on Areopagus about the unknown God is to be understood, Clement adds, i.e. as infinite, God is unknowable, but God can be known through grace and the Logos revealed in Christ.

Keeping in mind Clement’s polemical context, it should also be remembered how these claims run parallel to his arguments against various forms of Gnosticism.

27 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* II,5,4.

28 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,72,4.

29 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* II,74,1.

30 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,1,3–4.

31 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,4.

32 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,5–72,1.

33 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,81,6–82,4.

Clement's theory of the divine Logos, although clearly inspired by Philo, should be understood in relation to his beliefs in the incarnation of the Logos in Christ. As Eric Osborn puts it, Clement's claims in his *Excerpts ad Theodotus* remove any abstractness from the notion of the logos.<sup>34</sup> To the extent that negative theology is wielded in order to draw attention to the need for the revealed Logos in Christ, negative theology may be said to be wielded for the sake of Christology, even if of a highly philosophical nature. While taking over some Gnostic vocabulary, Clement clearly rejects the form of gnosis that only the elect few have of God. God has to some degree revealed himself to all people through his Logos that became flesh, in some sense even from the beginning, albeit indirectly and in parabolic form, in Pagan culture and philosophy. This does not, then, mean that there is a knowledge of God that precedes the revelation of the Logos, but only that the Logos was already at work before its incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Even if Philo and Clement may have been influential on Christian thought, negative theology did not play so prominent a role in subsequent Alexandrian theologies, like those of Origen and Athanasius. The reason was perhaps that it was at this point associated with strains of Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, but also the argument made by the Arians that God the Father is essentially "other" (ἄλλότριος) to everything else and, as such, unknown even to the Son.<sup>35</sup> That the Son is, however, unique in knowing God, was an important part of the argument made by Nicene orthodoxy against Arianism. While probably agreeing with the Arians about the ineffability of God, Athanasius argued that God's ineffability is exactly what makes human beings know the Father only through the Son.<sup>36</sup> As emphasized by Thomas F. Torrance, Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310–367) made a similar claim when he argued that since "no one knows the Father but the Son," we should let our "thoughts of the Father be at one with the thoughts of the Son," who is the only revelation of God to us.<sup>37</sup> The perfect knowledge of God is to know that even if we must not be ignorant of God, we cannot describe God, says Hilary.<sup>38</sup> We "must believe, must apprehend, must worship," since "such acts of devotion must stand in lieu of definition." While negative theology was as such applied in a polemical context against Arianism, its conclusions were doxological.

That negative theology also had a homiletic use with an ecclesiological impact is clear from such orations as Cyril of Jerusalem's sixth catechetical oration: "Of God we speak not all we ought," says Cyril, but "in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge." As with Hilary, this Socratic acknowledgment of ignorance leads to a call for devotion: "Therefore magnify the Lord with me, and let

<sup>34</sup> Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 210. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Exc.* 19–20.

<sup>35</sup> Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 62–66.

<sup>36</sup> Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 76. Athanasius, *Con. Ar.* 1,33.

<sup>37</sup> Hilarius, *De trin.* II,6. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Hilarius, *De trin.* II,7.

us exalt His Name together – all of us in common, for one alone is powerless.”<sup>39</sup> To this extent, negative theology at this point not only highlighted the need for a relational Christology, but it also had a communal perspective. These were the fundamental concerns that were taken over by later apologists for Nicene orthodoxy.

### 3. Silence and Luminous Darkness

For the Cappadocian theologians, as is well known, negative theology became an essential element in the defense of Nicene orthodoxy against Neo-Arianism. A simple explanation for this shift may be the fact that Neo-Arians, such as Eunomius of Cyzicus, did not now appeal so much to the “otherness” of God the Father, as to what may be called a theological rationalism that took theological language to be descriptive of God’s essence or nature. Much has been said about the entire Cappadocian debate with Neo-Arianism, but, for now, it suffices to say that Cappadocian theology, to a large extent, was formulated as an alternative to such rationalism. While Eunomius insisted that God can essentially be defined as “ungenerate,” the Cappadocians insisted that the divine essence is incomprehensible and beyond definitions. What should also become clear from the following is how Cappadocian negative theology simultaneously reaffirmed the need for a Christological foundation.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), in his first theological oration, made it clear that the prerequisite for doing theology is silence. In order to talk about God, one must first stop and listen to God (cf. Ps 46:11). We need to be silent (συχολάσαι) to know God and judge rightly, says Gregory.<sup>40</sup> In his second theological oration, it becomes clear that the limitations of theology are related to the nature of God.<sup>41</sup> God is essentially hidden from human beings, like the mercy seat that was hidden behind the curtain according to Exodus (Exod 26:31–33). Even the most exalted, heavenly things are far more distant from God than they are from human beings. Like many others, Gregory took the story of Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai as an expression of this fact. Moses did not get to see the face of God but had to stand in a cleft in the rock so that he could only see God from behind when God was passing by. This, in Gregory’s interpretation, signifies the fact that in order to know anything at all about God, one needs to stand firmly planted in the Logos of God who became incarnate for us (τῷ σαρκωθέντι δι’ ἡμᾶς θεῷ Λόγω). Again, one knows only God through the Logos revealed in Christ, allegorically depicted as a “rock.” This knowledge, moreover, does not offer an abstract insight into God’s hidden nature. One

<sup>39</sup> Cyrillus Hierosolymitanus, *Cat. ad Ill.* 6,2.

<sup>40</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 27,3.

<sup>41</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,3.



may have an instinctive knowledge of God from what can be seen and deduced from creation, but this does not mean that some form of natural theology makes it possible to bypass revelation.<sup>42</sup> Language may point indirectly to God, but it does not make it possible to grasp the nature or essence of God. The trinitarian doctrine of God is not an abstract theory of God's being, but, says Gregory, the divine unity of distinctions is rather the paradox (*ὁ παράδοξον*) that illuminates reasoning about God.<sup>43</sup>

It is arguably this sensibility to the paradoxical that comes to expression when Gregory famously claims that we are "saved by the sufferings of the impassible."<sup>44</sup> The God who cannot suffer nevertheless suffers in Christ. This should, of course, not be too hastily taken for a paradox in the sense of a Kantian antinomy or a Kierkegaardian absurdity. Nevertheless, for Gregory, the driving force in theological reasoning must be the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, and the union of divine and human natures in Christ. Negative theology is, so to speak, a preliminary reminder that theological reasoning should form organically around this mystery rather than being deduced from an abstract philosophical concept of God. The "starting point," says Gregory, must be the fact that God cannot be named, which is why God can only be talked about in relational terms.<sup>45</sup> Since no mind or language can embrace "God's substance in its fullness," says Gregory, "our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole." Theological reasoning, in other words, never reaches a comprehensive system of thought.

To use a perhaps somewhat anachronistic term, one might be tempted to say that Christian theology is fundamentally dialectical theology.<sup>46</sup> Theology is, as Gregory of Nazianzus puts it, characterized by contradictory arguments more than any other philosophy. Theology is a philosophical discipline, then, but one that is particularly prone to bumping up against its own limits: "The slightest objection puts an end to the discussion and prevents it from continuing," says Gregory, adding that it is "like suddenly pulling on the reins of galloping horses, which then turn around, startled by the shock."<sup>47</sup> This is what the Ecclesiast realized when the more he immersed himself in theology, the more he realized how derailed his thoughts had become. When one nevertheless attempts to achieve a final comprehension of God, this is when idolatry occurs. Idolatry, as Gregory describes it, results from a kind of fatigue that occurs when one's mind gives up its attempts at grasping God. Instead of accepting their own inability to grasp God, people create their own gods from comprehensible things.<sup>48</sup> In other words, idolatry occurs when dialectical thinking

<sup>42</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,6.

<sup>43</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,1.

<sup>44</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 30,5.

<sup>45</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 30,17–18.

<sup>46</sup> Steenbuch, "Frelse og forsoning," 4.

<sup>47</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,21.

<sup>48</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,13.

is given up in theology and, instead, an attempt is made to put theology into a complete system of thought.

It seems to be this view of the limits of theology that appears in the saying that “concepts create idols – only wonder comprehends anything,” a citation sometimes attributed to Gregory of Nyssa in popular theology.<sup>49</sup> While this saying does not exactly appear in Gregory’s works, it may be based on a claim made in his *On the Life of Moses*. Here Gregory explained that “any concept that comes from a comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.”<sup>50</sup> The point from Gregory of Nazianzus is affirmed, then, that idolatry occurs when one thinks to have finally grasped the nature or essence of God. What Moses learned from God’s manifestation in the burning bush was that none of the things that can be apprehended by sense or contemplated by understanding have any intrinsic being.<sup>51</sup> God possesses existence in his own nature, but even the person who “in quietude” (ἡσυχίας) studies philosophical matters will barely apprehend the true being (τὸ ὄν). Non-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν), on the other hand, is that which has no self-subsisting nature (ἑαυτοῦ τὴν φύσιν).<sup>52</sup>

The technical details of Gregory’s negative theology are elaborated upon in his polemical works against Eunomius. The primary theme of these is, however, Christological, as is clear already from Gregory’s introduction. “The rock must be Christ,” says Gregory, which should arguably also be kept in mind when Gregory at one point against Eunomius concludes that the aptest response to having learned how widely the divine nature differs from human nature is that people “quietly” (ἡσυχίας) abide within their “proper limits” (τοῖς ἰδίοις ὅροις).<sup>53</sup> This attitude should not be confused with quietism. On the contrary, since one cannot finally comprehend God, one needs to keep on talking about God. This is why, Gregory, like Basil, defended the human ability to make up new names for God through the process of conceptualization or *epinoia*. Theological language, whether based on tradition or Scripture, is fundamentally hermeneutic (ἐρμηνευτικὸν) as it does not grasp (περιέχειν) the divine nature (τὴν θείαν φύσιν).<sup>54</sup>

Again, theological language is relational, but it must also be Christological. People do not have an abstract concept of God as Father, but “those who hear the name of the Father, receive the Son along with Him in their thoughts,” as Gregory puts it against Eunomius.<sup>55</sup> Neo-Arians, on the other hand, only got a “bare” or abstract notion of God’s name if God is defined simply as ungenerate. Silence, then, is the only

<sup>49</sup> The author has not been able to trace the origins of this attribution, which is, however, quite widespread.

<sup>50</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,165.

<sup>51</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,24.

<sup>52</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,23.

<sup>53</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Con. Eun.* II,1,96.

<sup>54</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ad Abl.* 3,1,42–43.

<sup>55</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ref. conf. Eun.* 100.

proper response to such an abstract notion of God, but one can and should talk about God as revealed through Christ. This Christological orientation is arguably just as important as the much-celebrated distinction between God's incomprehensible substance and God's comprehensible activities in Cappadocian thought.

#### 4. Theology of the Gap

The Cappadocians did not limit themselves to negative theology, but often they also expressed a sweeping anti-essentialism about created nature as well. As Basil argued in a polemic against Neo-Arianism, since people do not know anything about even the physiology of the minutest ant, they should not, as Eunomius had done, brag about their knowledge about “the things that are” (τῶν ὄντων).<sup>56</sup> To this extent, negative theology had something to say about creation as well. What Scot Douglas has called the “theology of the gap” in Gregory of Nyssa's thinking is largely due to the need for establishing a negative theology that wards off any attempt at comprehending the nature of God, while at the same time bringing into view the inescapable changeability of created nature.<sup>57</sup> It is this fundamental ontological condition that results in a theological epistemology, where human language and thinking about God cannot be enclosed in a final system.

This clear ontological and linguistic distinction between God and creation was expressed frequently in Gregory of Nyssa's polemics against Eunomius, for example when he argued that the created and the uncreated are as opposed to each other as their names (σημαινόμενον) are.<sup>58</sup> As Gregory puts it elsewhere, there is a “wide and insurmountable interval” (πολὸν γὰρ τὸ μέσον καὶ ἀδιεξίτητον) that separates (διατετεῖχισται) uncreated from created nature.<sup>59</sup> Thus, what Sokolowski called “the Christian distinction” between God and everything else, is confirmed.<sup>60</sup> For Gregory, as he explained in a sermon on Ecclesiastes, this is because creation itself is the gap or *diastema* that divides the created from the uncreated, but this also means that creation is “contained within itself” and as such subject to change as a basic condition.<sup>61</sup>

Obviously, there is also a more positive side to Gregory's often celebrated spiritual or, if one prefers, “mystical” theology, that, as Martin Laird has argued, can just as

<sup>56</sup> Basilios Magnus, *Ep.* 16,1.

<sup>57</sup> Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 4–6.

<sup>58</sup> Gregorius Nyssenens, *Con. Eun.* I,1,504.

<sup>59</sup> Gregorius Nyssenens, *Con. Eun.* II,1,69–70.

<sup>60</sup> Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.

<sup>61</sup> Gregorius Nyssenens, *In Eccl.* 412,6–14.

well be described as a mysticism of light as one of darkness.<sup>62</sup> This should not, however, make us overlook the clear negative conditions for theology as such. The limits imposed on created nature by negative theology have implications for theological ethics as well as anthropology. Gregory of Nyssa's first sermon on the Beatitudes is a good example. Having first acknowledged that beatitude consists in assimilation to God, Gregory goes on to lament the utter impossibility of imitating the impassible nature.<sup>63</sup> It is this basic aporia that is solved by the gospel. God, by humbling himself in becoming human, has now made it possible to have fellowship with God after all. It is not by fleeing from creatureliness but, on the contrary, in humility that human beings can relate to God. To this extent, negative theology puts a limit on human aspirations, but this limit also becomes the starting point for a new possibility of participation in God as proclaimed by the gospel.

This should also be kept in mind when Gregory of Nazianzus could so frequently talk about deification. "Let us become gods for his sake," exhorted Gregory in a paschal homily, adding that we should do so, "since he became human for our sake."<sup>64</sup> Since Christ gave himself for us, we should "become everything that Christ became for us." Obviously, Gregory is not here making a point about negative theology, but his line of thought is similar to that of Gregory of Nyssa above. Human beings are not to become like God in his impassible and incomprehensible essence but should become what God became for human beings. Deification or *theosis*, then, is not about escaping the conditions of created nature, but about becoming truly human as God was truly human in Christ.

Of course, such an argument could be made without using negative theology, but one may at least say that negative theology can serve as a hermeneutical tool that helps avoid misunderstandings about what it means to imitate the incomprehensible God who is only known as revealed in the incarnated Logos. Although Gregory of Nyssa in his work on Moses anticipates later developments in negative theology when talking about the "luminous darkness of God" (λαμπρῶ γνόφῳ), his point was arguably not that spiritual progress culminates in a diffuse ignorance, but that having experienced the infinite goodness of God, one is to realize that God can only be known by following the Logos.<sup>65</sup> This is what Moses learned when he was placed in a cleft of a rock, and only could see God from behind, namely that seeing God consists in following God wherever he leads.<sup>66</sup>

As should be clear by now, from the inceptions of Christian theology, negative theology was rarely a distinct or separate venture, but it played a relative role that

62 Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa," 592–616.

63 Gregorius Nyssenus, *Or. Beat.* 1,4.

64 Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 1,4–5.

65 Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,163. God's goodness is infinite and as such cannot be defined, but this certainly does not mean that God is beyond good.

66 Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,243–252.

guided the development of Christian dogma. It did so in a diversity of apologetical and polemical contexts. As these contexts changed, negative theology also took on new expressions. A rather constant core emerges, however, namely that the ineffability of “he, who is” (Exod 3:14) is what necessitates the revelation of God by the divine Logos if human beings are to know God at all. In other words, negative theology in classical Christian orthodoxy was subordinate to Christology, if not in all cases, then at least in many of the most important and influential applications of negative theology.

## 5. God Beyond Being

So far, it has been observed that negative theology from Philo and early Christian thought was to a large degree centered on the Mosaic notion of God as “he who is.” As the creator, God is ineffable, but God can be known as revealed by the divine Logos. It would seem, then, that nothing in the above suggests the more radical idea that God is in some way “beyond being” or perhaps even “nothing” as would become the case in adaptations of Neo-Platonic ideas. There are precursors for this notion in Plato’s *Republic*, where Socrates described “the good” as “beyond being” (ἐκείνα τῆς οὐσίας), and the thought experiments of the *Parmenides* about “the One” that is uncomposed and, as such, without being.<sup>67</sup> These came to play a significant role in Middle and Neo-Platonism from the 2nd century and on, but their role in Christian theology was rather marginal until much later.

This is true even if Clement of Alexandria grappled with the idea that theology is dealing with an aporia, such that even “being” is little more than an imprecise term that is gropingly used in attempts at describing God. If God is “the One” (τὸ ἓν), as mentioned above, then God must be infinite (ἄπειρον) and as such without names, including “being.”<sup>68</sup> This did not, however, lead Clement to systematically describe God as, for example, “beyond being” or “nothing” in his works. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), for example, may also have described God as the good “beyond all beings” (ὁ ὑπερέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας), but this hardly amounted to an understanding of God as beyond being altogether, let alone “nothing.”<sup>69</sup>

The roots of a more radical understanding of God as somehow “nothing” may be traced back to so-called gnostic theologies such as that of the Alexandrian theologian Basilides (d. c. 140 AD). As Hippolytus relates, Basilides (may have) held that the seed of the world was created by the will of the “not-being God” (οὐκ ὄν θεός).

<sup>67</sup> Plato, *Resp.* 509b8–10. Plato, *Parm.* 137c–142a.

<sup>68</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,81,3–6.

<sup>69</sup> Athanasius, *Con. Gen.* 2,5–13. Stępień – Kocharczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 75–76.

This “not-being God” is “not even ineffable.”<sup>70</sup> As has been suggested by some scholars, this latter claim may have been a polemic against Philo’s Jewish philosophy, where God was said to be ineffable.<sup>71</sup> To Basilides, Philo may have been right in describing the Jewish creator God as “ineffable” but, above this God, resides a superior God who is not-being and not even ineffable. At any rate, the notion of God as not-being seems clearly opposed to the description of God as “he who is” (ὁ ὢν) in Exodus. If it is true that the notion of God as not-being was really developed in opposition to Jewish philosophy, then it may seem that this notion carried with it a certain anti-Jewish tendency. To this extent, such a radical version of negative theology would have been rejected by Christian apologists, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who emphasized the continuity between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.

Like the Christians, Plotinus (204–270) rejected Gnosticism but stressed that the source of being is itself beyond being. While Plato’s point in the *Parmenides* seemed to be that the One cannot really be anything if it really is one, for Plotinus the One was a principle “beyond being” like the good in the *Republic*, from which everything else derives its being. While Plotinus does not elaborate on the idea that the One is nothing, he comes close, for example when talking about “the marvel of the One,” which is “non-being” (μη ὄν).<sup>72</sup> Plotinus’ disciple Porphyry went further as he described the One as “non-being beyond being” (τὸ ὑπὲρ τὸ ὄν μη ὄν).<sup>73</sup> In this way, as described by Conor Cunningham, Plotinus, and the subsequent tradition develops a “meontology” in which non-being is the highest principle.<sup>74</sup> Plotinus, even if opposed to the Gnostics, ends up utilizing their logic, Cunningham argues, so that “that which is” becomes subordinate to “that which is not.”

While most Christians resisted such “meontological” notions, there are examples that negative theology in its Neo-Platonic form could be wielded in defense of Christian orthodoxy. This was the case when Marius Victorinus (290–364) argued against Arianism that God is before being (προόν) and as such non-being (μη ὄν) in the sense of being (ὄν) beyond being.<sup>75</sup> Arianism, which held the Son of God to be a created being, may be right in saying, then, that the Son came from “out of nothing,” but this nothing is the divine nothing and not the nothing out of which creation was created.<sup>76</sup> This shows how a Neo-Platonic notion of God as beyond being could also be used for a Christological purpose, making it clear that it is not necessarily opposed to such a notion. In general, however, Christian orthodoxy landed on a more moderate note, still insisting that God is being, rather than beyond being. Seeing

<sup>70</sup> Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7,20,3.

<sup>71</sup> Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 85–87.

<sup>72</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* VI,9,5. Plotinus more frequently describes matter as nothing.

<sup>73</sup> Porphyry, *Sent.* 26. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 690.

<sup>74</sup> Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Adv. Ar.* 1,49. Marius Victorinus, *Ad Cand.* 12,7–10.

<sup>76</sup> Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 82–83.

that this was the case should make us wary of claiming too strong an influence of Neo-Platonic thought on Christian theology at this point.

As once argued by Harry Wolfson, the use of negative terms for God by Philo expressed “the unlikeness between God and all other beings.”<sup>77</sup> It appears that something similar was the case in Christian forms of negative theology that were even more keen on upholding the Christian distinction between God and everything else.<sup>78</sup> Neo-Platonic thought, however, was, as argued by Cunningham, “unable to posit an ontological difference,” since the One cannot create anything different from itself, but can only reproduce itself in every emanation.<sup>79</sup> This is why in Neo-Platonism, negative theology, as argued by Raoul Mortley, became an instrument for abstracting differences so that the continuity between levels of being could stand out.<sup>80</sup>

Even if there are obvious similarities between Judeo-Christian negative theologies and Neo-Platonic forms, then, these are hardly due to Christians taking over a Neo-Platonic “system” of thought in its entirety. In fact, as has so often been argued, Neo-Platonism was not so much an ontological system to be adopted as an attempt to describe how the soul can be united with the One, i.e. attain so-called *henosis*. In what Plotinus poetically described as “the flight of the alone to the alone,” negative theology became a tool for abstracting all distinctions and discursive thoughts that keep the soul from becoming united to the One.<sup>81</sup> With Plotinus’s programmatic exhortation to “remove everything” (ἄφελε πάντα), negation became a central tool in subsequent Neo-Platonism, where the aim was to overcome all distinctions made by discursive reasoning.<sup>82</sup> Proclus (412–485), for example, emphasized that ultimately negations must also be negated if a move is to be made beyond the discursive approach to the One.<sup>83</sup>

It was as such that the Neo-Platonic tradition would most famously be merged with Christian theology in the works of Dionysius, as best exemplified by the small book *On Mystical Theology*. Here, the story of Moses who encounters God in the cloud on the mountain (Exod 20:21) became a narrative of what Dionysius famously described as the “darkness of ignorance” (τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας).<sup>84</sup> God exists beyond all positive and negative descriptions, including being and non-being. God may, of course, be described as “the one, who is,” as in Exodus, but God is also not “he who is.” God is beyond being as well as non-being and, as such, God is hyper-being. This does not mean that God is also beyond good and evil, but God

<sup>77</sup> Wolfson, “Negative Attributes,” 145.

<sup>78</sup> See also Wissink, “Two Forms of Negative Theology,” 118.

<sup>79</sup> Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 53.

<sup>81</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* VI,9,11.

<sup>82</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* V,3,17.

<sup>83</sup> Proclus, *In Pl. Par.* VII,53k–76k.

<sup>84</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De myst. theol.* 1,3.

is identified by Dionysius with the Platonic good “beyond all being” (ὕπερ πάντα τὰ ὄντα).<sup>85</sup> These hyper-phatic developments in negative theology meant, however, that God would eventually be conceived of as beyond difference itself, making it urgent to avoid the pantheism that is allegedly implied. For example, John Scottus Eriugena (815–877), the Irish monk who translated Dionysius into Latin, explained how God created everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), but since God, who is beyond being, is in a sense “nothing” himself, creation out of nothing can be understood as God creating the world out of himself.<sup>86</sup> This does not mean that creation and God are identical, but because God is beyond being, creation can be in God without being identical with God.

## 6. Pure Nothingness

The Dionysian tradition pioneered by John in the Latin West had a profound influence in subsequent centuries. This was not least the case in the preaching of Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), whose famous call to ask God to “deliver us from God” is a good example of how a reinforced theological meontology would have repercussions in moral thought.<sup>87</sup> God as revealed seems to be the author of both good and evil, since these are necessary conditions for creation, but in himself, God is beyond both good and evil.<sup>88</sup> This was apparently also why Eckhart could provocatively say that “God is not good” and that God is “unlovable” since God is “above all love and loveliness.” The exhortation to quietude that follows from this line of thought reflects the need to remove all distinctions between God and the human person. God must cease to be an object of thought so that God can act spontaneously through the human person.<sup>89</sup> While this portrays traditional Neo-Platonic concerns, Eckhart’s outlook may also have been the result of having adopted a univocal ontology while simultaneously wanting to avoid making God into an object that can be distinguished from other objects.<sup>90</sup> To put it shortly, if God is something, then human beings must be nothing, but if human beings are something, then God must be nothing. In order to relate to God, then, human beings must become nothing, like God.

Before Eckhart, Marguerite Porete (1250–1310) had described how the soul must be annihilated in order to be in a “pure nothingness without thought.”<sup>91</sup> A similar

<sup>85</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De div. nom.* 4,3–7.

<sup>86</sup> John Scottus Eriugena, *Per.* 3,675c.

<sup>87</sup> Eckhart, *Pr.* 52.

<sup>88</sup> Eckhart, *Pr.* 83. Moss, “The Problem of Evil,” 38–43.

<sup>89</sup> Eckhart, *Pr.* 52.

<sup>90</sup> Moss, “The Problem of Evil,” 35–37.

<sup>91</sup> Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 95.



concern is apparent in Eckhart's preaching, and like in the case of Porete it is clear that there are moral philosophical implications, albeit rather negative, in Eckhart's thought. One can only be united with God in what John Caputo has called "the suspension of all teleological attitudes." God can only be loved as not-God, says Eckhart, in a kind of exalted ignorance. This is not a "way" or a method to be followed but a matter of allowing oneself to sink into oneness with God, as Eckhart dramatically puts it, "as out of something and into nothingness."<sup>92</sup> This perhaps also explains why for Eckhart love was not the highest virtue. In his treatise on "detachment" (*abegescheidenheit*), Eckhart explains how like most other virtues, love has some regard for created things. God, however, can only be known in a radical detachment, since only such detachment comes close to nothing.<sup>93</sup>

It may be argued that this exemplifies how Neo-Platonic meontology threatens to tip over into an almost "nihilistic" denial of all positive values.<sup>94</sup> The fear of moral libertinism at least seems to have been among the reasons for the papal condemnations of such mystics as Porete and Eckhart.<sup>95</sup> At any rate, in comparison to earlier forms of negative theology, the alleged suspension of teleology seems to run counter to, for example, Clement's proleptic understanding of faith or Gregory of Nyssa's epektatic notion of what it means to follow the Logos. In both cases, negative theology served to underscore the need to relate to God, not in God's infinite essence, but in the revealed Christ. It is true that Clement, not completely unlike Eckhart, could often emphasize how imitation of God consisted in needing as little as possible, seeing, in Stoic terms, how self-sufficiency (*αὐταρκείας*) was to be "the first principle of salvation."<sup>96</sup> It is equally true, however, that while the complete likeness to God's ineffable nature was not possible, for Clement, imitation of God consisted just as much in entering communities of love in imitation of the reciprocal relations established by the divine Logos.<sup>97</sup> While there can be no participation in the divine nature, God can be imitated by following the commands of the revealed Logos.<sup>98</sup>

In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, it is true that he could, for example in his homilies on the *Song of Songs*, also emphasize the need to distinguish between one's true self and its surroundings by using a sort of abstractive method.<sup>99</sup> This hardly pertained, however, to an Eckhartian attitude of detachment. Gregory argued in these homilies, much like in his book on Moses, that God is seen by always following (*ἀκολουθεῖν*) after God, and that the contemplation of God's face consists

<sup>92</sup> Eckhart, *Pr.* 83.

<sup>93</sup> Eckhart, *Von Abe.*

<sup>94</sup> Steenbuch, "På sporet af 'intet,'" 129–130.

<sup>95</sup> Clement XIII, *In Agro Dominico*, nos. 4–5.

<sup>96</sup> Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paed.* II,3,39,1.

<sup>97</sup> Avilla, *Ownership*, 45.

<sup>98</sup> E.g., Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paed.* I,6,26,3; Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* VII,14,88,6.

<sup>99</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 63.

in unceasingly following the Logos.<sup>100</sup> The differences between this approach and later Neo-Platonic attitudes to faith in Christian theology, like that of Eckhart's, should probably not be exaggerated, but it should be clear that for someone like Gregory, imitation of God did not consist in becoming "nothing" in a state of detachment, but in imitating the incarnated Logos in Christ. Like God, human beings are not essentially "nothing" but infinitely more than what can be described in finite terms.<sup>101</sup>

When Eckhartian themes popped up again in the reformation period with Anabaptists such as Hans Denck, the emphasis on the need to "become nothing" so that God can "become something," was paralleled by an emphasis on the experience of the inner word.<sup>102</sup> As the magisterial reformers, such as Martin Luther, increasingly saw it, this pertained to a denial of the external, preached word focused on the crucified Christ. As argued by Luther, one should not seek to deal with God in His hidden majesty, since the *Deus absconditus* only brings terror and uncertainty, but God should be sought in his revealed Word.<sup>103</sup> When Moses could only see God from behind, the point was, Luther argued in his lectures on Exodus, that God's mercy is only seen as revealed in the divine Word.<sup>104</sup> Considering how Luther's theology to some extent rested on a nominalistic ontology, it can hardly be seen as a return to some form of "classical" version of negative theology, with its Platonic underpinnings, even if similar themes of divine incomprehensibility, as shown above, were applied in order to draw attention to the need for revelation. While having retrieved these concerns, Lutheran theology at the same time radicalized the Christological function of negative theology to the point of barring all possibilities of a "mystical" union with God in a silent "nothing" beyond the preached Word.<sup>105</sup>

## Final Remarks

While it would be a step too far to say that the influx of Neo-Platonic thought in later Christian theology resulted in a subversion of an original Christological concern, the "mystical" predilection for the "darkness of ignorance" may at least seem to be partly at odds with the Christological orientation that placed negative theology in

<sup>100</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 356.

<sup>101</sup> Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Denck, *Schriften*, 33,15–24.

<sup>103</sup> As Jürgen Moltmann (*The Crucified God*, 299–309) has described it, with his "theology of the cross," Luther made a reversal of negative theology, which was now no longer man's negative way to God, but God's negative way to man.

<sup>104</sup> Luther, *Werke*, 157.

<sup>105</sup> See, however, Mjaaland, *The Hidden God*; Alfvåg, "Luther," 101–114.

a subordinate and preliminary position to revelation. Today it may perhaps even be argued that the roots of so-called “nihilism” can be traced to the notion of God or the good as somehow beyond being associated particularly with Neo-Platonic meontology.<sup>106</sup> It would be going too far to trace all developments of negative theology beyond the reformation period in, for example, Jacob Böhme and F.W.J. Schelling and its culmination in forms of “nihilism” in modern philosophy and theology. It may be noticed, nevertheless, how the notion of God or the good as somehow beyond being is today expressed in philosophies preoccupied with difference and negation.

Such post-modern parallels to earlier negative theology are often hostile to classical notions of participation that are, as in Levinas and Derrida, seen as almost violent attempts at reducing “the other” to “the same” in a grand ontological scheme of “being.”<sup>107</sup> Instead, the good should be sought in “the other,” and as such outside or beyond being as in Plato’s *Republic*, or even in non-being. As Cunningham argues, the Derridean notion of *différance* is “the trace of the Plotinian One, which is non-being.”<sup>108</sup> If, nevertheless, *différance* is not exactly negative theology, as Derrida himself assured, it only holds the more true that negative theology in such ontologies has been transformed into a secular negativity that easily spills over into a denial of all positivity to the point of ridding itself of its theological origins.<sup>109</sup> If in post-modern negative theologies, “GxD” (sometimes spelled this way) is reduced to sheer negation, such a notion is hardly distinguishable from what Walter Benjamin described as a “methodical nihilism” and its perpetual negation of the status quo.<sup>110</sup>

Contemporary negative theology has often been formulated on a nominalist or Post-Kantian basis that absolutizes the distinction between the transcendent God and the knowing subject.<sup>111</sup> The result is not rarely a fideistic skepticism about classical participatory ontologies that runs through much of the contemporary attitude to faith and reason. If, however, as argued recently by Timothy Troutner, theology is to move beyond what Martin Laird has described as its “apophatic rage,” among the requirements for reclaiming negative theology is that it be given “a distinctively Christological shape.”<sup>112</sup> Seeing how Christology was central to early Christian formulations of negative theology, this should be kept in mind to balance negative theology with classical orthodoxy. Such a Christological orientation does not cancel out negative theology by making it only a step towards positive theology. God always remains a mystery, as observed by Maximus the Confessor in the 6th century, but

<sup>106</sup> Steenbuch, “På sporet af ‘intet,’” 138–139. In the case of Eckhart, see Godínez, “The Deity’s Nothingness,” 73–86.

<sup>107</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

<sup>108</sup> Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 160.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, *Différance*, 88.

<sup>110</sup> Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment.” Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 85–94.

<sup>111</sup> Troutner, “The Eclipse of the Word.”

<sup>112</sup> Laird, “Whereof We Speak,” 1–12.

God's natural hiddenness is expressed exactly to the extent that it is made more hidden through revelation.<sup>113</sup>

The danger of collapsing the distinction between God and creation in a common nothingness (as hinted at by Cunningham) may be avoided by a renewed appreciation for the Christian distinction between God and everything else in classical theology. The classical notion of participation, on the other hand, is necessary for avoiding confusing this distinction with a radically secular evacuation of God into sheer transcendence. God is essentially hidden, not because God is absent, but because God is radically present as the reality in which created beings participate in a manner known only to God, as Denys Turner once remarked.<sup>114</sup> There is a need for a Christological concern for God's "immanent transcendence" which, more than simply being a destabilizing figure, is realized as a positive mystery in the incarnate Christ.<sup>115</sup> The beatific vision of God is not, *pace* Turner, "the end of [the] story"<sup>116</sup> culminating in the darkness of union, but the ever-new beginning that takes place as one encounters the trinitarian God in preaching, acts of worship and love toward others. As argued by Karl Barth, the incomprehensibility and infinity of God are not abstract ideas, then, but qualities that draw their true meaning from the goodness of God who has made himself our Father in Jesus Christ.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Maximus, *Cap.* 1,9.

<sup>114</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 264. Maximus, *Cap.* 1,7.

<sup>115</sup> Sandbeck, "God as Immanent Transcendence."

<sup>116</sup> Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 150. Troutner, "Beyond Silence," 918–919.

<sup>117</sup> Barth, *Prayer*, 25.

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# The Neoplatonic Roots of Apophatic Theology in Medieval Islam on the Example of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr/Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr* (The Conference of the Birds) by ‘Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī (ca. 1145–1221)

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**Abstract:** This study will focus on the metaphysical and theological thought of Farīd ad-dīn ‘Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, i.e. Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (ca. 1145/6–1221). ‘Aṭṭār’s best known masterpiece, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (Arabic *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*), *The Conference of the Birds*, is seen as the finest example of Sufi love poetry in the Persian language after Rūmī. His thought is distinguished by its provocative and radical theology of love, as well as elements of apophaticism. ‘Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī’s vision of God should be analyzed in the context of Neoplatonism, which in a special way contributed to the development of apophatic Muslim thought. This approach challenged classical Islamic theism, whose representatives were convinced that they had sufficient knowledge of God from the Quran and Sunna. Aṭṭār’s doctrine focused on God who is a part of the universe. In other words, this author believed that whatever exists is part of God.

**Keywords:** apophatic theology, Neoplatonism, ‘Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, Sufism, Sufi thought, the One – God, tawḥīd – Simurḡ, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr*, *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*, *The Conference of the Birds*, Talab, ‘Išq, Ma’rifa, Fuqur, Fanā’, medieval Muslim theology, Islamic thought

Negative theological approaches in Medieval Muslim thought flourished in many Sufi circles. They are now considered to be more pluralistic options than any of the other “orthodox” theological trends in the Middle Ages. Apophatic paths as specific techniques of self-negation in Muslim theology and philosophy had diverse and changing applications and manifestations in the writings of various authors, including Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 874),<sup>1</sup> Faḥr ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-‘Irāqī (1213–1289),<sup>2</sup> Awḥad ad-Dīn al-Balyānī (d. 1284 or 1287),<sup>3</sup> Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (1058–1111),<sup>4</sup> Ibrāhīm ibn

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The article adopts the DMG transcription, i.e. the Arabic and Persian transcription based on the German Oriental Society (DMG = Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft) system by Carl Brockelmann and Hans Wehr. The standard for this transcription is the transliteration of the Arabic alphabet for the Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Urdu and Pashto languages into the Latin alphabet. *Information und Dokumentation – Umschrift*; Brockelmann, *Die Transliteration*.

<sup>1</sup> Abdur Rabb, *Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī*.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Irāqī, *Divine Flashes*.

<sup>3</sup> Balyānī, *Whoso Knoweth Himself*.

<sup>4</sup> Ġazālī, *Minḥāḡ*.

al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 1162),<sup>5</sup> ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī (1077–1166),<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kalābāḍī (10th c.),<sup>7</sup> ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥarkūšī (d. 1016),<sup>8</sup> ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Quṣayrī (986–1073),<sup>9</sup> Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ar-Rifā‘ī (1118–1182),<sup>10</sup> Šihāb ad-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar as-Suhrawardī (1145–1234),<sup>11</sup> Abū ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān As-Sulamī an-Naysabūrī (d. 1021),<sup>12</sup> Sahl ibn ‘Abdallāh at-Tustarī (818–896)<sup>13</sup> and especially the great philosopher and theologian Muhyī ad-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn ‘Arabī (1160–1245).<sup>14</sup> Although some authors (e.g. Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāġ, d. 988) strenuously demonstrated Sufism’s compatibility with mainstream Sunni Islam,<sup>15</sup> according to many Sunni theologians, apophatic visions of God were “unorthodox” or at best highly controversial.<sup>16</sup>

The original apophatic ideas were already held by authors, such as the above-mentioned Sahl ibn ‘Abdallāh at-Tustarī, in the early days of the formation of Sufism in the Sunni milieu. Understanding God in this type of metaphysical approach was strongly connected with anthropology. It was a kind of the mystery of union and realization in the center of the Personality (in fact, Holy Personality), called *sirr* (“secret”), or in the heart, where existence unites with the Being.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary researchers, however, not only analyze these apophatic perceptions of the absolute as an expression of tensions between different denominations of Islam, but also identify trans-religious theological and philosophical interactions between them.<sup>18</sup>

This study will focus on the metaphysical and theological thought of Farīd ad-dīn ‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī, i.e. Abū Ḥamid bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (ca. 1145/6–1221). This Sufi thinker was not chosen by accident. First, ‘Aṭṭār was one of the greatest theoreticians of Sufism, hagiographers and philosophers of Medieval Persia, who offered both an apophatic vision and a practical methodology based on Neoplatonic elements. Second, some authors see ‘Aṭṭār’s works as a type of cognitive poetics, an analoguous projection at the intersection of metaphysics and theology.<sup>19</sup>

5 Ḥāmidī, *Die ismailitische Theologie*.

6 Ġilānī, *Al-Faḥ ar-Rabbānī*.

7 Kalābāḍī, *Kitāb at-Ta’arruf*.

8 Ḥarkūšī, *Kitāb Tahḍīb al-Asrār*.

9 Quṣayrī, *Epistle on Sufism*.

10 Rifā‘ī, *Hālat Ahl*; Rifā‘ī, *Kitāb al-Burhān*.

11 Suhrawardī, *Kitāb ‘Awārīf*; Suhrawardī, *Rasā’ il A’lām al-Hudā*.

12 Sulamī, *Darajāt aṣ-ṣādiqīn*; Sulamī, “Risālat al-Malāmatīyyah,” 91–127; Sulamī, *Ḥaqā’iq at-tafsīr*.

13 Tustarī, *Tafsīr*.

14 Ibn ‘Arabī, “Kitāb al-Masā’il,” 303–321; Ibn ‘Arabī, “Kitāb at-Taḡalliyāt,” 322–354; Ibn ‘Arabī, “Kitāb Iṣṭilāḥ,” 407–417; Ibn ‘Arabī, “Kitāb Manzil al-Quṭb,” 250–260; Ibn ‘Arabī, *Šarḥ Risālat*; Ibn ‘Arabī, *Sufis of Andalusia*.

15 Sarrāġ, *Kitāb al-Luma’*.

16 Dāraqutnī, *Kitāb aṣ-ṣifāt*.

17 Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 1–320; Böwering, *Mystical Vision*; Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 38–43.

18 Ghomlaghi, “Analytical Comparison,” 123–146; Zarrabi-Zadeh, “Sufism,” 330–342; Kars, *Unsayng God*, 20–280; ‘Omar, *The Doctrines of the Māturīdīte*; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism*.

19 Sadeghi, “The Function of Macrofiction,” 125–147.

‘Aṭṭār was not as famous as Ġalāl ad-dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273) and Ḥwāḡe Šams ad-Dīn Moḥammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Šīrāzī (1315–1390). However, although overshadowed by his great successors, nowadays Aṭṭār is still being re-discovered, *inter alia* as a proponent of the apophatic vision of God.<sup>20</sup> He also had a considerable influence on Sufi Muslim thinkers after his works had been rediscovered in the 15th century. In the Middle Ages, however, he was known under his original name Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm, whereas today he is better recognized by his pen-names: Farīd al-Dīn (فرید الدین) and ‘Aṭṭār (عطار) – “the pharmacist.”

‘Aṭṭār’s best known masterpiece, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (Arabic *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*), *The Conference of the Birds*, is seen as the finest example of Sufi love poetry in the Persian language after Rūmī. His thought is distinguished by its provocative and radical theology of love, as well as elements of apophaticism. Moreover, nowadays many lines of ‘Aṭṭār’s epics and lyrics are cited independently of his poems as maxims.

‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī wrote his works in very turbulent times in the Persianate Turkic and Sunni Muslim Khwarazmian empire, which covered large parts of present-day Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran, from 1077 to 1231. It was a period of ongoing disputes over the dominant form of Islam (Sunni-Shi‘ite polemics), Islamic cultural pluralism (Arabic, Persian, Turkish elements), and increased activity of alternative (“heterodox”) movements in Islam, for example the intellectual venture of the Ismailis.<sup>21</sup> These complex interactions resulted, among other things, in the strong influences and adoption of Neoplatonic elements by the Sufis in Persia. It should also be emphasized that Persian philosophers and theologians – even as they wrote in Persian – adopted many Arabic terms as a medium of expression<sup>22</sup> (therefore, this publication contains many references to both Persian and Arabic terminology).

Thus, ‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī’s vision of God should be analyzed in the context of Neoplatonism, which in a special way contributed to the development of apophatic Muslim thought. This approach challenged classical Islamic theism, whose representatives were convinced that they had sufficient knowledge of God from the Quran and Sunna.<sup>23</sup> Neoplatonic philosophy has often been described as the final synthesis of the major currents in ancient Greek philosophy, such as Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Platonism and Aristotelianism with oriental religious and mystical elements.<sup>24</sup> From the mid-3rd century to the mid-7th century, Neoplatonism was the dominant philosophical ideology in the Christian Middle East, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe and the place of individual human beings.

It is an open question to what extent the elite of Sufi ascetic theologians – supporters of the apophatic approach – realized that they had borrowed Neoplatonic

<sup>20</sup> Saani – Salrai, “Study and Comparison of Mystical Themes,” 285–308.

<sup>21</sup> Landolt, “‘Aṭṭār, Sufism and Ismailism,” 3–26.

<sup>22</sup> Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology*; Meisami, *Structure and Meaning*.

<sup>23</sup> Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 25–120; Walker, *The Universal Soul*, 149–166.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd, *Neoplatonism*; Watts, *City and School*.

ideas. In any case, this borrowing of Neoplatonic ideas was possible thanks to the absorption of Hellenistic heritage in the Muslim world in the early Abbasid period.<sup>25</sup> Two hundred years after the Arab conquest of Syria, Iraq and Persia, a new impetus was given to the translation of Greek philosophical texts thanks to the patronage of three early Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, al-Manṣūr (754–775), Hārūn ar-Rašīd (786–809) and his son al-Maʿmūn (813–833). During this period, mainly the works of Plato and Aristotle were translated.<sup>26</sup> However, ca. 840, parts of *Enneads* IV–VI by Plotinus were also translated into Arabic,<sup>27</sup> thanks to which the “concept” of the One, the ideas of emanation and multiplicity, the “true” first principle of Intelligence, as well as the conceptions of love and soul, and so on, became better known and assimilated in the world of Islam. In this context, Neoplatonism, as a radical system of philosophical thought with controversial theological interpretations, was enshrined in the writings of such thinkers as the *Iḥwān aṣ-ṣafāʾ* – “The Brethren of Purity,” a secret Arab confraternity in Basra thanks to which the philosophical and religious *Rasāʾil iḥwān aṣ-ṣafāʾ wa ḥillān al-wafāʾ* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity and Loyal Friends) were created on the basis of “orthodox” Neoplatonism.

Nevertheless, over the centuries Neoplatonism has been linked with the theology of the Ismaʿīli group in Islam, one of the three great branches of Shīʿism.

Certainly, after this period of translations, a kind of Muslim apophaticism developed systematically,<sup>28</sup> as a trend that avoided creating positive descriptions of God’s qualities. The introduction of Neoplatonic ideas into the Islamic world fueled apophatic views in the Muslim understanding of God and strongly influenced the development of Sufism, which can be described as a mystical branch of Islam. However, Neoplatonic ideas that inspired Sufi thinkers did not make them a sect of Islam. Sufis became more of a dimension of Islam, as there were various Sufi orders within both Sunni and Shīʿa communities. Finally, from a methodological point of view, the difficulty arises from the fact that the ideas of both Neoplatonism and Sufism are extremely difficult to isolate and define.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Zarrabi-Zadeh, “Sufism,” 334.

<sup>26</sup> Badawi, *La transmission de la philosophie*, 15–46; Madkour – van den Bergh, “L’Organon d’Aristote,” 47–49; Tregio, “*Ce qui se trouve là et ce qui est fait*,” 111–131; Peters, “The Greek and Syriac Background,” 40–51; Pines, *Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts*; Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, 50–200; Shayegan, “The Transmission of Greek Philosophy,” 98–104.

<sup>27</sup> Endress, *The Works of Yahya ibn ʿAdī*, 36–37; Lettinck, *Aristotle’s “Physics”*, 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Jaichi, *Early Philosophical Sūfism*; Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*.

<sup>29</sup> Milani, “Mysticism in the Islamic World,” 513; Zarrabi-Zadeh, “Sufism,” 330–342. Uždavinys, “From Alexandria to Harran,” 119–128.

## 1. 'Aṭṭār's Life in the Context of the Apophatic Tradition and Multi-ideological Interactions

Reconstructing 'Aṭṭār's biography is not easy because of the lack of reliable information about the author. 'Aṭṭār was rarely mentioned by his contemporaries, e.g. Moḥammad 'Awfi (d. after 1223) and K̲vāja Naṣīr ad-dīn Ṭūsī (1200–1273).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, 'Aṭṭār himself did not make historians' task easier. He did not say much about himself, and his works contain only isolated allusions to the events from his life. The difficulty of establishing historical facts about 'Aṭṭār is now explained by the nature of his surviving works. These treatises focus on the metaphysical aspects, referring to a more timeless vision of mysticism, in which apophaticism plays a large role.<sup>31</sup> In other words, 'Aṭṭār simply drew the reader's attention to a spiritual topic, without providing any biographical details. There is only one piece of biographical information found in 'Aṭṭār's writings, i.e. 1177 (573 H.) – the date of the finalisation of his famous work, *Maqāmāt aṭ-tuyūr* (The Conference of the Birds). However, for critical researchers even this date is unclear because it does not appear in any of the surviving manuscripts of this work.

It is equally doubtful whether, as some authors would claim, Farīd ad-dīn 'Aṭṭār lived to be about a hundred years old. The dates of his birth in 1119 and death in 1230 are also questioned by modern historians.<sup>32</sup> It seems best to accept that 'Aṭṭār was born, and even this date is unclear, in 1145, in Nišāpūr<sup>33</sup> (Neyshabur), located 115 km west of Mašhad in Khorasan. Therefore, according to Eastern tradition, he was given the surname *Niṣāpūrī*. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Nišāpūr was a city not only of political importance but also a flourishing center of arts, crafts, and trade. It was advantageously located on the Silk Road between Syria and China.<sup>34</sup> Cosmopolitan Nišāpūr was both an important political and economic city and a religious-philosophical center, home to famous Sufis, scholars and religious groups.<sup>35</sup> Although Sufis generally favored apophatic theological approaches, the relationship between apophaticism and Sufism or mysticism in Islam was not clearly defined. For in Muslim thought, various apophatic approaches to theology could have various connections with mysticism, and some Sufis, due to their ambition to acquire empirical or visionary knowledge, tended to undermine radical apophatic approaches,

<sup>30</sup> Reinert, "‘Aṭṭār, Shaykh Farīd al-dīn," 20; Ritter, 'Aṭṭār, 752–755; 'Aṭṭār, *Fifty Poems of 'Aṭṭār*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Blois, *Persian Literature*, 233.

<sup>32</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, VII.

<sup>33</sup> In particular, it is the result of detailed research conducted by Forūzānfar, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl*, 7–16. He calculated that 'Aṭṭār was born in 540 Š., i.e. 1145/1146.

<sup>34</sup> Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur*, 4–12; Kröger, *Nishapur Glass*; Wilkinson, *Nishapur*; Jaouiche, *The Histories of Nishapur*.

<sup>35</sup> Malamuda, "Sufi Organizations," 427–442; Melchert, "Sufis," 237–247.

which, in their view, exaggerated the unknowability of God.<sup>36</sup> ‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī was at the crossroads of certain ideological dilemmas where different views on the nature of God clashed.

The sources agree that ‘Aṭṭār spent most of his years in Nišāpur. Persian writer Sadīd ad-Dīn ‘Awfī (12/13th centuries) attested that ‘Aṭṭār composed literary masterpieces during the decline of the Great Seljuk Empire (1140–1194).<sup>37</sup> Probably during his lifetime ‘Aṭṭār was known only in Nišāpūr. After his death, his theological heritage was largely forgotten until the 15th century. Some mystics in Persia rediscovered and appreciated his work in the early modern era.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, some details of ‘Aṭṭār’s life can be gleaned from surviving sources. ‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī was educated in the field of theology, medicine, and Arabic in Mašhad. Literally ‘Aṭṭār means “a pharmacist,” which became his nick-name because he practiced this profession and was said to serve a large number of customers in his pharmacy.<sup>39</sup> He could have inherited a prosperous pharmacy from his father. Dawlatšāh Samarqandī (d. after 1487) noted that ‘Aṭṭār’s pharmacy was located in Šādyaḥ (a district of Nišāpūr). Other important Sufi biographers, Dawlatšāh Samarqandī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ġāmī (d. 1492), recorded a story about ‘Aṭṭār’s spiritual conversion.<sup>40</sup> According to this tradition, a wandering hideous dervish impetuously entered the pharmacy, asking ‘Aṭṭār to prepare a medicine for his departure from this world. Before ‘Aṭṭār could say anything or help him, the poor ascetic died. ‘Aṭṭār understood that the dervish did not suffer poverty, but because he renounced worldly possessions and dedicated his life, he was poor before God. ‘Aṭṭār, impressed by this event, without a moment’s hesitation left his job to join the local Sufi Tarikat. Some scholars even claim that ‘Aṭṭār wandered a lot in various regions of the Middle East like a poor dervish, visiting many cities and regions such as Turkistan, Arabia (Mecca), Syria (Damascus), and India, learning from influential Sufis<sup>41</sup> the spiritual discipline associated with selfless service and love of all people.<sup>42</sup>

After reaching the appropriate level of spiritual development, ‘Aṭṭār reopened his pharmacy in Nišāpūr and began promoting Sufi thought. Accused of heresy because of his apophatic theology, he might have left Nišāpūr. Finally, he returned to Nišāpūr a short time before his death there.

Even in ‘Aṭṭār’s attitude towards death, a kind of apophatic approach is noticeable, namely, that hope for an imminent mystical union with God is irreducible to human arguments, especially material ones. The Persian tradition provides

36 Kars, *Unsayng God*.

37 ‘Awfī, *Lubāb al-albāb*, 480–482.

38 Reinert, “‘Aṭṭār, Shaykh Farid al-dīn,” 20.

39 Forūzānfar, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl*, 39.

40 Samarqandī, *Tadhkirat al-šū‘arā’*, 145; Ġāmī, *Nafahāt*, 599.

41 Bashiri, “Farid al-Din ‘Attar.”

42 Bashiri, “Farid al-Din ‘Attar.”

an interesting story about ‘Aṭṭār’s death. During the famous Mongol invasion of Nīšāpūr in 1221, he was taken prisoner by a Mongol who was on the point of killing him. Unexpectedly, another Mongol offered the captor a ransom of one thousand pieces of silver if he saved the old man’s life. ‘Aṭṭār’s captor was ready to accept the offer but the Sufi advised him to wait. ‘Aṭṭār presented himself as a man of importance, so the Mongol, assuming that he would acquire an even greater sum of silver, refused to take the amount. Later, another person came, this time offering only a sack of straw to free ‘Aṭṭār. So, ‘Aṭṭār told the Mongol to sell him for the sack, as that was all he was worth. Outraged at being made a fool, the Mongol cut off Aṭṭār’s head.<sup>43</sup> In the context of the story about ‘Aṭṭār’s death, words from his *The Conference of the Birds* come to mind involuntarily:

Accept my love or kill me now – your breath  
Revives me or consigns me here to death.<sup>44</sup>

## 2. Towards Apophaticism. The Evolution of Ideas in ‘Aṭṭār’s Works

We have fragments of information about the Sufi masters who influenced ‘Aṭṭār’s intellectual formation. Some researchers believe that ‘Aṭṭār was relatively well-versed in the literature, philosophy, astronomy, medical and pharmaceutical sciences related to his profession.<sup>45</sup> Others share a different opinion, claiming that it is difficult to find in ‘Aṭṭār’s works unequivocal evidence that would show us the extent of his education. What is admirable, however, is the exceptional creativity of ‘Aṭṭār and his stylistic finesse, which made him an outstanding poet of early Muslim mysticism. It is significant that he began with writing *Moṣibat-Nāma* and the *Elāhī-Nāma* while working in the pharmacy.<sup>46</sup>

There is also a problem in determining a complete list of ‘Aṭṭār’s works and whether he is the author of all the texts that are attributed to him. This question has so far not been conclusively resolved. Scholars disagree on both the number of works he is said to have created and the number of distichs he is alleged to have authored. For example, Rezā Ġoli ḥān Hedāyat’s conclusions sound quite peculiar, as he estimates ‘Aṭṭār’s writings at 190 works comprising 100,000 distichs (the glorious classic work of Persian literature, *Šāhnāmeḥ* by Firdawsi, contains only 60,000 distichs). In turn, other authors adopt numerical-esoteric explications, stating that the sum of

<sup>43</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *Wisdom of the East*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 1303–1325.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *Fifty Poems*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ritter, “Philologika X,” 148.

‘Attār’s works is equivalent to the number of suras of the Qur‘an, i.e. 114.<sup>47</sup> The most reliable research on the subject indicates that the number of ‘Attār’s texts ranges from 9 to 12 volumes.<sup>48</sup>

Stylistic differences observed between ‘Attār’s mystical (apophatic) works lead researchers to analyze the evolution of his thought. This also concerns divergent influences of individual denominations of Islam (Sunism, Shi‘ism) on ‘Attār’s works. Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971) explains these different levels of literary and thematic forms in ‘Attār’s texts by the evolution of ‘Attār’s spirituality.<sup>49</sup> He distinguishes three phases of ‘Attār’s creativity, which can be schematically presented as follows:

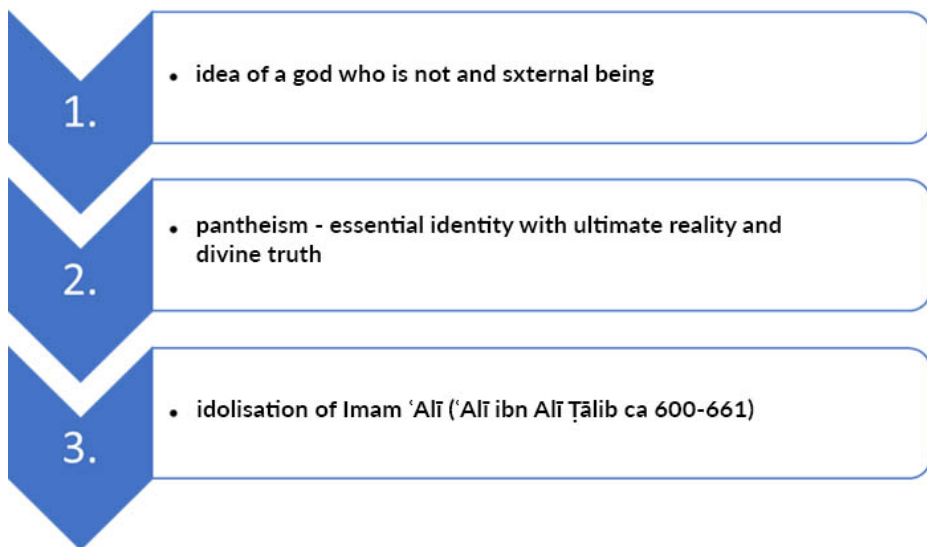


Fig. 1. The evolution of Attār’s thought

Modern research has further shown that ‘Attār’s authorship was falsely attributed to works such as *Maẓhar al-‘ağā’ib* (The Executor of Wonders) and *Lisān al-ġayb* (Voice from the Outer World).<sup>50</sup>

The theological and philosophical evolution of ‘Attār’s thought is situated in the context of the polarisation of the Islamic denominations in medieval Islam.

<sup>47</sup> Bashiri, “Farid al-Din ‘Attar.”

<sup>48</sup> In the introductions to *Mohtār-Nāma* and *Ḥosrow-Nāma*, ‘Attār lists the titles of his later works: *Dīvān*, *Asrār-Nāma*, *Maqāmāt al-ṭuyūr* (= *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*), *Moṣibat-Nāma*, *Elāhī-Nāma*, *Ġawāher-Nāma*, *Šarḥ al-Qalb*.

<sup>49</sup> Ritter, “Philologika X,” 134–173, especially 143–144.

<sup>50</sup> Šerani, “Tašnifāt i šaiḥ,” 1–97; Ritter, “Philologika X,” 134–173; Ritter, “Philologika XIV,” 1–76; Ritter, “Philologika XV,” 1–88; Ritter, “Philologika XVI,” 194–239.



The thought of the Muslim Sufi mystics increasingly contrasted with the interpretations of the Sunni ulema. Sufism and the official Islamic law were incompatible because Sunni theologians concentrated on the development and implementation of Islamic law (*fiqh*, *šari‘a*). In contrast, Sufis focused on the phenomena whose existence cannot be detected by sensory perception. During their mystical experiences, Sufis perceived extrasensory phenomena through the soul, the mind, the imagination, or some other faculty. The conceptualisation of these experiences was very controversial in Islam. Sufis, disregarding Sharia in their pursuit of knowledge of God (*ma‘rifa*, “interior knowledge”), became more and more entangled in apophatic views of the Absolute. However, the theologically distinct groups of Sunni, Shi‘a and Sufis were forced to function in one society, while Sufism had an increasing influence on a large part of Muslims. For this reason, some Muslim thinkers tried to reconcile Sufism with Sunniism, for example, such concepts were proposed by al-Ġazālī (1058–1111).

The relative “reconciliation” between the Sunni and Shi‘a circles enabled the spread of Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭaraqa*) in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. As late as the 11th century, Sufis had formed loose groups without institutional structures. However, already during the life of ‘Aṭṭār, these groups appeared as autonomous Sufi institutions.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in the 13th century, the Sufis blended into the mosaic of the Islamic world with their original “heretical” (in terms of Sunni) idea of an all-encompassing God.

### 3. The Apophatic Vision of God in *The Conference of the Birds*

Before starting the analysis of *The Conference of the Birds*, it is worth noting that the essential philosophical and theological terms in Persian (except for a few cases) are Arabic loanwords. Usually, they have not lost their original meanings, and sometimes they have been enriched with new ones. These loanwords are written exactly as in Arabic (the pronunciation of these words is another matter)<sup>52</sup>. Although *Maqāmāt at-ṭuyūr* was written in Persian even after the rise of New Persian literature in the 10th century, Arabic remained the main language of scholarship in Persia. Moreover, after the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, the Arabic language was increasingly confined to purely philosophical and theological works, where it continued to be used for centuries to come. Interestingly, much of the Arabic literature produced in Persia originated in Aṭṭār’s home region – i.e., in Khorasan.<sup>53</sup> In this analysis, therefore,

<sup>51</sup> Malamuda, “Sufi Organizations,” 427–442.

<sup>52</sup> Lazard, “Les emprunts arabes,” 53–67; Sadeghi, “L’influence de l’arabe,” 145–152.

<sup>53</sup> Danner, “Arabic Literature in Iran,” 566–594.

Arabic terminology and its transcription dominate, especially since Sufi thought was intensively developed in the Arab world. Sufi Arabic terminology has been established throughout the Muslim world, e.g. thanks to the contemporary Aṭṭār, the most eminent Sufi theologian of the Muslim late Middle Ages Muḥyī ad-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. ‘Arabī al-Ḥatīmī aṭ-Ṭā’ī or Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240).<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Aṭṭār’s key theological terms can be paradoxically treated as Arabicisms in the Persian language of *The Conference of the Birds*, and at the same time as Arabic terms used by him to express his Sufi thought.

Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī presented an original, expanded spiritual vision of God, which inspired successive generations of Sufis. We find this vision in several of his works, including *Asrār-Nāma* (Book of Secrets), and *Elāhī-Nāma* (Divine Book)<sup>55</sup> about *zuhd* (asceticism). Without any doubt, among Aṭṭār’s books, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (or *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*) – *The Conference of the Birds*,<sup>56</sup> is a masterpiece of apophatic theology. The use of the image of birds traveling to their pantheistic king is not itself a purely original contribution by ‘Aṭṭār. The author made special use of al-Ġazālī’s text on birds (*Risālat aṭ-ṭayr*),<sup>57</sup> as well some analogies to the aforementioned Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā<sup>58</sup> – “the Brothers of Serenity or the Brethren of Purity.”

*Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr* or *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* is most often translated as *The Conference of the Birds*, but the title of this work can also be rendered as “The Logic of the Birds.” The Arabic term *mantiq* has many meanings, including “speaking” and “logic.” This wonderful and metaphorically rich philosophical religious poem consists of many spiritual, instructive stories in the great context of apophatic theology. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has had exceptionally numerous translation into both Western and Oriental languages (for example, there are several English translations).<sup>59</sup>

The center of gravity of the metaphorical-apophatic interpretation of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* regarding God is found in the extremely ingenious pun between the Persian words *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) and *sī murġ* (سی مرغ). *Sīmurġ* refers to the mythological bird present in Persian thought from antiquity, somewhat reminiscent of the phoenix bird, and the expression *sī murġ* literally means “thirty birds.” Before presenting the points of convergence of these two terms with completely different connotations on the basis of Aṭṭār’s apophatic interpretation, it is worth signalling the roots of the term *Sīmurġ* in Persian culture.

54 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*; Buana, “Nature Symbols,” 434–456.

55 ‘Aṭṭār, *The Ilahi-Nama*.

56 This masterpiece has had many editions: ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Masani); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Nott); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds. A Sufi Allegory*; ‘Aṭṭār, *The Allegorical ‘Conference of the Birds’*.

57 Ġazālī, *Al-Ġawāhir al-ġawālī*, 147–151.

58 Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā’, *Ar-Risāla*, 157–163.

59 See, e.g. ‘Aṭṭār, *Conference* (Masani); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Nott); ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds. A Sufi Allegory*; ‘Aṭṭār, *The Allegorical ‘Conference of the Birds’*.

The medieval term *Sīmurǧ* (سيمرغ), also spelled *simorǧ*, *simorg*, *simurg*, *simoorg*, *simorq* or *simourv*, is derived from the Middle Persian terms *sēnmuruy* and *sēnmurw*. In Pazend, i.e. the writing systems used for the Middle Persian language, the equivalent of *Sīmurǧ* was the form of *sīna-mrū*. The primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism, composed in the Avestan language, contained the term *mərəyō Saēnō* – “bird of Saēn,” a bird of prey, possibly an eagle, falcon or sparrowhawk, as can be inferred from the etymological cognate of the Sanskrit *śyenaḥ* (श्येनः), “eagle, bird of prey,” which also appears as a divine being.<sup>60</sup> *Sīmurǧ* is sometimes identified with other mythological birds, such as *Quqnūs* (ققنوس) – “the phoenix” and *Humā* (هما). It should be remembered, however, that *Sīmurǧ* is a distinctly separate mythological entity, which, thanks to its popularity, somehow “absorbed” other similar mythological entities.<sup>61</sup>

*Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* depicts the adventures of a group of birds who wanted to meet their king, the great *Sīmurǧ*. These restless bird-travelers embarked on a spiritually perilous journey under the leadership of *Hu-hud* (هدهد; Persian and Arabic) i.e. the Hoopoe.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, one by one, the birds gave up on the journey, finding various excuses not to continue the tiring expedition. In his rich description of the birds’ migration, Aṭṭār cleverly presented much didactic wisdom with deep apophatic theological allusions in a captivating poetic style.

*The Conference of the Birds* starts with an image of a great gathering of birds. They came from all over the world, debating why they did not have a king. Among the birds, the hoopoe appeared to be the best leader because it was a messenger from the transcendental world. He had knowledge about the Creator and the mysteries of all beings.<sup>63</sup> Such a belief stems from the Qur’ān. Although the hoopoe is mentioned only once<sup>64</sup> in the Qur’ān (النَّمْلُ *an-Naml*: 27:20–29<sup>65</sup>), it still occupies a unique position in Muslim folklore and tradition to this day.<sup>66</sup> The Qur’ān presents the Hoopoe (here capitalized) as intelligent and clever. He recognized and worshiped God as his Lord and effectively communicated with Solomon, the prophet and king. The very first statements of the hoopoe show an allegorical description of the Sufi concept of the knowledge of God:

60 Schmidt, “The Sēmurw,” 1–85; Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches*, 662.

61 Cirlot, *A Dictionary*, 253.

62 It is about the bird *Upupa epops*.

63 Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 613–636; 673–692.

64 Kościelniak, *Tematyczna konkordancja*, 95.

65 See: 27:20 وَتَقَفُّوْا تَقَفُّدَ الطَّيْرِ فَقَالَ مَا لِي لَا أَرَى الْهُدُودَ أَمْ كَانِ مِنَ الْغَائِبِيْنَ

“Then he [Solomon] inspected the birds, and said, “Why do I not see the hoopoe? Or is he among the absentees?”

27:29 اذْهَبْ بِكِتَابِي هٰذَا

“Go [Hoopoe] with this letter of mine [Solomon].”

66 Lassner, “Islamizing the Story of the Hoopoe,” 97–101; Dupree, “An Interpretation,” 173–193.

I know our king – but how can I alone  
 Endure the journey to His distant throne?  
 Join me, and when at last we end our quest  
 Our king will greet you as His honoured guest.  
 How long will you persist in blasphemy?  
 Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny –  
 Whoever can evade the Self transcends  
 This world and as a lover he ascends.  
 Set free your soul; impatient of delay,  
 Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:  
 We have a king; beyond Kafs mountain peak  
 The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,  
 And He is always near to us, though we  
 Live far from His transcendent majesty.  
 A hundred thousand veils of dark and light  
 Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,  
 And in both worlds no being shares the throne  
 That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone.<sup>67</sup>

The birds flocked after the hoopoe in search of *Simurg*. However, they had to fly through seven valleys that were treacherous to their spirituality. During their long and wearisome journey, the birds repeatedly asked existential and deep questions, expecting answers from the hoopoe. Their leader answered with unshakable certainty to various doubts, illustrating his arguments with short anecdotes.

The very first valley of *Talab* (Arabic loanword in Persian: طلب,<sup>68</sup> i.e. the valley of the quest), through which the birds flew, brought dilemmas. The winged travelers experienced a hundred hardships and trials. All this ultimately led to the rejection of all dogma, faith and unbelief:

Must purify itself and move apart  
 From everything that is – when this is done,  
 The Lord's light blazes brighter than the sun.<sup>69</sup>

After flying through the valley of initial trials, the birds reached the second valley of *Išq* (Arabic loanword in Persian: عشق [Persian modern pronunciation: *ešq*]), i.e. the valley of love. It was in this valley that the birds understood that reason and love were separate realities. This typical Sufi mystical idea refers to the boundless “divine

<sup>67</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 673–692.

<sup>68</sup> Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 817.

<sup>69</sup> 'Aṭṭār, *The Conferenc* (Darbandi), ll. 3234–3250.

love” or “the love of a creature for its creator,” where worldly knowledge becomes utterly useless:

Love here is fire; its thick smoke clouds the head –  
 When love has come the intellect has fled;  
 It cannot tutor love, and all its care  
 Supplies no remedy for love’s despair.<sup>70</sup>

In the third valley of *Al-Ma‘rifa* (Arabic loanword in Persian: المعرفة,<sup>71</sup> [Persian modern pronunciation: *ma‘refat*]), i.e. the valley of understanding), the birds discovered that knowledge was temporary, but understanding higher things endured everything. Overcoming flaws and weaknesses brought the seeker closer to the goal:

Till one shall draw aside the secrets’ veil –  
 Perfected, of rare courage he must be  
 To dive through that immense, uncharted sea.<sup>72</sup>

*Ma‘rifa* literally means “knowledge,” but it is the mystical knowledge of God or “higher realities,” which is the ultimate goal of Sufism. Sufis have used the term since the Middle Ages to conceptualize the intuitive (mystical) knowledge needed to discover the eternal truth. This reality is only accessible through ecstatic experiences. In this way, the *Ma‘rifa* corresponds to the Neoplatonic “gnosis” (γνῶσις).<sup>73</sup> It is worth remembering that *Ma‘rifa* is one of the “four doors,” that is, one of “the four stages” of Sufism (next to *šari‘a* [شريعة] – “legal path,” *ṭarīqah* [طريقة] “methodico – esoteric path,” and *ḥaqīqa* [حقيقة] – “mystical truth/verity”).

In the fourth valley of *Istignā* (استغناء [Istignā’] Arabic loanword in Persian<sup>74</sup> in the form استغنا, [Istignā, contemporary Persian pronunciation: *esteḡnā*]) the birds learned about the necessity of independence or detachment. The term *Istignā* itself means “freedom from care” or “lack of concern or care.” In the context of the fifth valley, ‘Aṭṭār meant by it the separation from the desire to possess and the desire to discover. The birds discovered that they had become part of the universe, that they were separated from the physical, material reality:

All claims, all lust for meaning disappear.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3331–3348.

<sup>71</sup> Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 1271.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3486–3505.

<sup>73</sup> Ebstein, “Classifications of Knowledge,” 33–64.

<sup>74</sup> Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 53.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3581–3599.

They experienced relativism and a different order of the mystical world, where planets were as small as grains of dust and elephants were indistinguishable from ants.<sup>76</sup>

While staying in the fifth valley of *Tawhīd* (Arabic loanword in Persian: توحيد),<sup>77</sup> i.e. the valley of the “Unity of God,” the birds realized that one reality includes unity and multiplicity. The Hoopoe even stated that while we had perceptions of many entities, there was actually only one divine reality that was complete in its unity. According to this apophatic approach, the birds were transformed into beings in the void – without a sense of endlessness (eternity). The birds discovered the fundamental metaphysical principle that God is above all, i.e. beyond unity, plurality, and endlessness:

The many here are merged in one; one form  
Involves the multifarious, thick swarm  
(This is the oneness of diversity,  
Not oneness locked in singularity);  
Unit and number here have passed away;  
Forget for-ever and Creation’s day –  
That day is gone; eternity is gone.<sup>78</sup>

It is clear that the Sunni understating of *tawhīd* as the Oneness of Allah, and describing him as one with no partners,<sup>79</sup> has come into conflict with the monistic understanding held by ‘Aṭṭār in *The Conference of the Birds*. ‘Aṭṭār’s thought was the culmination of the Sufi approach to *tawhīd*, which began with the classical Islamic understanding of this term. The apophatic view of the Sufis reached the point of sensing and perceiving the Oneness of God beyond reason, with the heart and conscience.<sup>80</sup>

After achieving unity, forgetting all things and oneself, the birds entered into the sixth valley of *Ḥayrat* (Arabic loanword in Persian: حیرت,<sup>81</sup> Persian modern pronunciation: *heyrat*), i.e. the valley of astonishment and bewilderment. There, in utmost amazement, the birds experience the extraordinary beauty of the Beloved being. This experience, however, did not overshadow the sadness and depression. The winged travelers realized that they had a problem with both their existing knowledge and the process of cognition itself. They were not even conscious of themselves.

76 ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3581–3599.

77 Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 334.

78 ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3692–3707.

79 Shapoo, “The Understanding of Tawhīd,” 214–240; Düzgün, “Kur’an’ın Tevhīd Felsefesi,” 3–21.

80 Şeker, “Sufi Attitudes and Approaches,” 31–44.

81 Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 435.

The pilgrim will confess: "I cannot say;  
I have no certain knowledge any more;  
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure."<sup>82</sup>

Finally, only thirty birds reached the kingdom of *Sīmurǧ*, the seventh valley of *Fuqur* (فُقُر, Arabic loanword in Persian<sup>83</sup>) and *Fanā* (Arabic loanword from فناء [*Fanā*'], in Persian in the form: فنا [*Fanā*]),<sup>84</sup> i.e. the valley of the Selflessness and Forgetting in God. However, it turned out that it was impossible for the birds to meet the king. A high-ranking official of the birds' king ordered them to wait for *Sīmurǧ* (سِمْرُغ) long enough, and the birds finally realized that they were *Simurǧ* (سِمْرُغ) themselves because it was a group of thirty birds *sī* (سى "thirty") *murǧ* (مِرْغ; "birds").<sup>85</sup> In this way, the similarity in the pronunciation of the words *Sīmurǧ* (سِمْرُغ) and *sī* (سى "thirty") *murǧ* (مِرْغ; "birds") became an apophatic image of the monistic nature of God. This is the ultimate meaning of 'Attār's apophatic vision of God, the specific attempt to describe God with transcendent ideas, images, and sensory impressions:

With God both Self and evil disappear.  
When I escape the Self I will arise  
And be as God; the yearning pilgrim flies  
From this dark province of mortality  
To Nothingness and to Eternity.<sup>86</sup>

As a result, the seventh valley presents an apophatic vision of the human and divine condition, i.e. the disappearance of the self in the universe. The Wanderer becomes timeless, existing in both the past and the future. The last valley is, therefore, the culmination of a certain process of development of Sufi adepts, making them aware of the present and future existence of the thirty successful birds, which become only shadows chased by the celestial Sun – the *Sīmurǧ*. More, they themselves, lost in the Sea of His existence, are the *Simurǧ*.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>82</sup> 'Attār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3792–3811.

<sup>83</sup> Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 935.

<sup>84</sup> Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 939.

<sup>85</sup> 'Attār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3931–3948.

<sup>86</sup> 'Attār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3967–3986.

<sup>87</sup> Kościelniak, "Aspects of Divinization," 97.

#### 4. The Neoplatonic Genesis of Aṭṭār's Apophaticism

The philosophical-theological apophysis in the medieval Islamic lands focused on the problem of God's transcendence versus imminence.<sup>88</sup> *The Conference of the Birds* stresses that as long as a human being is separate, good and evil will arise; but when a person loses himself in the divine essence, he will be transcended by love.

When analyzing Aṭṭār's thought, it is by all means right to take into account the impact of Neoplatonism. It is worth stressing that the Ismaili State (1090–1256) existed in Persia during Aṭṭār's life (ca. 1145–1221). This Shī'a Nizari Ismaili state, also called the Alamut state, was founded by Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ (1050–1224), and was dominated by Neoplatonic influences. The guiding idea of unity was present in Ismaili cosmological principles under the overwhelming influence of the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation, but in a specific context of Shī'a adaptation. At the heart of the Ismaili cosmology, there is the Neoplatonic principle of a harmonious totality.<sup>89</sup>

Numerology was an integral part of the medieval mindset in the Muslim Ismailis' thought. Ismailis believed that numbers had religious meanings, and this was also influenced by Neoplatonism. The number "seven" plays a fundamental role in the Ismailis' speculations about seven heavens, seven continents, seven orifices in the skull, seven days in the week, seven prophets, and so forth.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, 'Aṭṭār Nišāpūri also used the Ismailis' symbol of seven, that is the seven valleys that the birds had to cross in order to find their king.

The final message of *The Conference of the Birds* is the apophatic statement that birds, despite their diversity of species, are only shadows of the eternal pantheistic *Ṣimurḡ*. The deepest message of this mystical masterpiece is that, admittedly, the birds will not be God when they reach the goal of their difficult journey but they will most certainly be immersed in God. Looking inside, the thirty birds discovered the divine image within themselves. In fact, their forms and activities are only a shadow of *Ṣimurḡ*. God, however, is not an empty idea. The true love for the Creator is concretized in self-sacrificing love that leaves aside life and desires. The thirty birds presented in *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* with understanding of the ultimate reality, their various doubts and fears during the journey, the explanations and wisdom of the hoopoe, and above all the discovery of the phenomenon of *Ṣimurḡ*, were an allegory for 'Aṭṭār. It was an allegory of the spiritual development of a particular Sufi who is exposed to many dangers.<sup>91</sup>

88 Kars, "Two Modes of Unsayng," 261–278.

89 Halm, *Kosmologie*, 53–65; Daftary, "Ismailism and Gnosis," 337–348; Mattila, *Philosophy as a Path to Happiness*, 64–65.

90 Hillenbrand, "A Neglected Source," 3–10.

91 Johan, "Bird Symbolism," 699–706; Kościelniak, "Aspects of Divinization," 98.



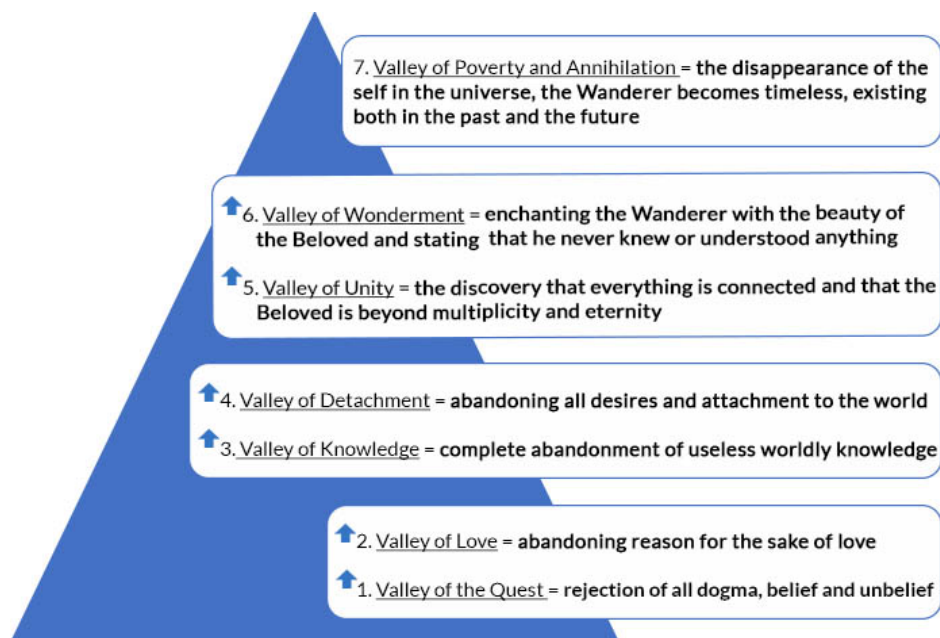


Fig. 2. Aṭṭār's apophatic view of God's unity with the universe expressed through the idea of the "seven valleys"

In his apophatic approach, Aṭṭār expressed the necessity of breaking down the individual ego, and recognizing the fundamental unity of God, creation and the individual self. According to *The Conference of the Birds*, a human being, having entered the enlightened state, obtained an awareness of the intrinsic unity (*tawḥīd*) between God and all that exists, including the individual's mind. This typical Sufi interpretation has been condemned as heretical by "orthodox" Sunni Islam.<sup>92</sup>

The analysis of 'Aṭṭār's texts and Neoplatonic thought leads to the conclusion that the Sufi master of Nišāpur depended on revealing close similarities to Neoplatonism. However, some topics raised in *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr*, i.e. the nature of God, the understanding of the soul and body, and the definition of terms such as "good," "evil," "beauty," "death," "life" and creation were dependent both on the complex spiritual cosmology of Plotinus as well on Neoplatonism in the version of Iamblichus (c.245 – c.325) and Proclus Lycius (412–485). Moreover, Aṭṭār modified his concept of the mystical union, which seems to have been also impacted to some

<sup>92</sup> Anṣārī, "Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism," 1–12.

extent by Buddhist influences (Buddhism had its influence in Nišāpur, as evidenced by the architecture).<sup>93</sup>

Neoplatonic elements in *The Conference of the Birds* were revealed in the concept according to which God is the total unity, at the same time the source and the main goal of all beings. Everything that comes from the Creator must return to Him because God is alpha and omega. Total immersion in God is basically the only legitimate goal of all human activities. According to ‘Aṭṭār, the main goal of all human beings is to experience the divine reality that is completely beyond the realm of ordinary perception.

Aṭṭār’s apophaticism expresses itself in the Neoplatonic idea that God is not separate from the universe as an “External Being” but that He is the totality of existence. In fact, it echoes Plotinus’ *Enneads*: “We must turn our power of apprehension inwards, and make it attend to what is there.”<sup>94</sup>

The thirty birds on their way to Simurḡ finally discover that their king is also their transcendent fullness. In this respect, *The Conference of the Birds* comes close to Neoplatonic pantheism.<sup>95</sup> The original wordplay used by Aṭṭār, i.e. *Simurḡ* (سيمرغ) and *sī* (سی “thirty”) *murḡ* (مرغ; “birds”), was in his apophatic theology and philosophy purely symbolic. In principle, regardless of the number of birds that arrived in *Simurḡ*’s kingdom, the same reality would be revealed – the infinite Unity.

According to Aṭṭār, God can be only discovered beyond all human knowledge and earthly experience. In principle, the soul will be freed from its erroneous ideas only when bodily perceptions are cast aside. For this reason, Sufis must “die to the world” for the love of God in order to attain spiritual knowledge:

O God, this is your servant’s last request –  
I love, and those who die for love die blest,  
And though for him I bid the world farewell,  
Love cannot make love’s slave an infidel.  
How many countless prayers you grant, dear Lord –  
Grant mine; grant my life’s vigil its reward!<sup>96</sup>

Both Aṭṭār’s apophatic thought and Neoplatonic concepts treat the relationship between body and soul similarly. According to Neoplatonism, there is no way to present the body as divine. It is only a harsh mortal and temporary reality. Entangled in matter, the body does not strive for beauty and good, but for ugliness and evil. Everything that is beautiful, valuable and divine is contained in the soul, but by

<sup>93</sup> Shafieifar, “A Study on the Influence,” 17–28.

<sup>94</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* V.1 [10], 12. 8–13.

<sup>95</sup> Taefi, “Aspects of Practical Mysticism,” 81–100.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 4061–4079.

no means in the body. The body is only entangled in temporary desires and wishes, being in fact a cage for the soul.<sup>97</sup> These Neoplatonic ideas are all too evident in Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī, who asks rhetorically at the beginning of his work:

Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems –  
Which matters more, the body or the soul?<sup>98</sup>

According to Attar, as in Neoplatonism, beauty goes beyond symmetry. Beauty is related to the ideal reality of God revealed in the hearts of human beings:

If you would glimpse the beauty we revere  
Look in your heart – its image will appear.<sup>99</sup>

For Aṭṭār, beauty is the appearance of divine light in the face of a human, similarly to the Neoplatonic identification of beauty with divine essence:

How long then will you seek for beauty here?  
Seek the unseen, and beauty will appear.<sup>100</sup>

‘Aṭṭār’s language is mysterious and symbolic,<sup>101</sup> and it is very difficult to translate all its mystic terms or metaphors.<sup>102</sup> This language is more understandable with the knowledge of Neoplatonic terminology. Regarding the ways in which Neoplatonism entered the Muslim environment, scholars point first to Anatolia and then to Persia. This is evidenced by certain Neoplatonic mystical elements already appearing in ancient Anatolian beliefs, e.g. regarding the sun. Some traces of this can be found in *The Conference of the Birds*.<sup>103</sup>

## Conclusions

Aṭṭār Nišāpūrī presents God in the framework of apophatic theology and philosophy quite differently from the Sunni Islamic dogmatists. It seems that in *The Conference of the Birds* apophatic and cataphatic theology meet in an original,

<sup>97</sup> Godelek, “The Neoplatonist Roots,” 57–60; Kościelniak, “Aspects of Divinization,” 98–99.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 833–853.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 833–853.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 2230–2247.

<sup>101</sup> Rafi, “Spirituality and Persian Literature,” 25–38.

<sup>102</sup> Khosroshahi – Sedighi, “Translation of Persian Mystic,” 552–557.

<sup>103</sup> Uzdavinys, “From Alexandria to Harran,” 119–128; Godelek, “The Neoplatonist Roots,” 57–60.

complementary contemplative reality. The apophatic approach refers to fragments referring to the manifestation of the world from the One, while the cataphatic approach refers to the need to return to the One.

The negative approach is a kind of warping of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr*. Aṭṭār’s allegory of the birds flying through the seven valleys expresses the idea that ultimately everything leads to silence and the abandonment of all intellectual considerations and speculations in favor of contemplation and divine unity. *The Conference of the Birds* abandons the idea of “duality” and separation between God and the universe. The absolute oneness of God is unknowable, beyond the impenetrable oneness of the divine world.<sup>104</sup>

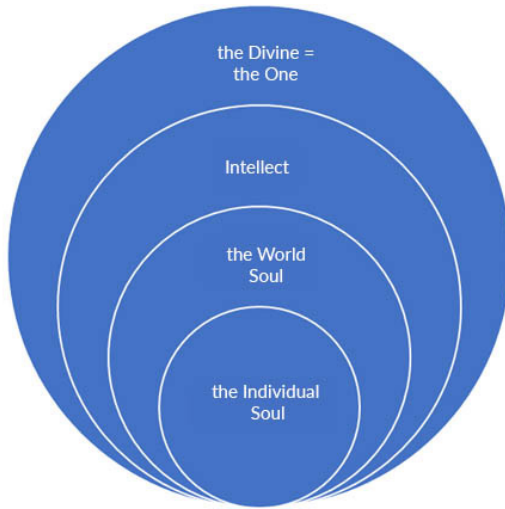


Fig. 3. Neoplatonism and ‘Aṭṭār Nišāpūri:  
nothing is separated or cut off from that which is before it

In this concept of the unity of God-universe-people, the Neoplatonic view of the soul is also revealed. The soul as the divine essence is the realm of true freedom. The body, on the other hand, is the prison of the soul, which can be released when the body dies. The soul as a divine essence is the source of perfection and exaltation:

Search for this king [God] within your heart; His soul  
Reveals itself in atoms of the Whole.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Zargar, “Sober in Mecca,” 272–297.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Aṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 1111–1129.

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# Negative Theology and Theophany in Dante's *Paradiso*

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**Abstract:** Dante's *Paradiso* presents a gothic theophany realizing the divine vision (*visio Dei*) in poetic language. Specifically, Dante's vision of a line from Scripture (DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM) in the Heaven of Jove (Canto XVIII) gives a concrete form of written letters to his vision of God. Yet all that Dante actually sees is only a sign of the invisible, metaphysical reality of God and the supersensible universe of pure being or love. This tension between the sensory plenitude of his vision and the transcendent truth that Dante envisages lends his poem its extraordinary force and attractive power. The paradoxes of negative theology and its inevitable relation with an affirmative theology expressed as poetic vision are worked out with matchless subtlety in Dante's descriptions and reflections, some of which are expounded in a speculative key in this essay drawn from a more detailed and comprehensive inquiry into the subject. The immediacy of Dante's vision of letters of Scripture in the Heaven of Jove serves as a metaphor for an unmediated vision of God, but the vision's content turns out to be nothing other than mediation – concretely, language as the medium mediating his relation to God as Logos. Dante's vision from beginning to end of the *Paradiso* is placed under the sign of the ineffability topos, yet what he sees are words and language and ultimately letters. Dramatically displaying the mediations in which language consists becomes itself a metaphorical realization of divine revelation. The mechanisms of signifying in language made visibly manifest in writing and specifically as the first line of the Book of Wisdom in Scripture are unveiled as a negatively theological revelation of divinity.

**Keywords:** negative theology, theophany, Scripture, revelation, DILIGITE, Dante, *Paradiso*

## Prolegomenon

In Canto XVIII, in one of the most extraordinary passages at the heart of the *Paradiso*, Dante sees thirty-five letters of Scripture – DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM – “painted” (“dipinto”) one after the other in the sky. After a dazzling song and dance, each of the incandescent letters breaks up into its component sparks, each spark a blessed soul. These soul-sparks then regroup to form the next letter in the series. The last letter, M, finally metamorphoses into a figure – the emblematic sign of the Roman Imperial Eagle outlined in its head and wings. Considered specifically from a literary-theoretical point of view, this scene is arguably the most

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This essay is extracted and adapted from Franke, *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso*, ix, 138–142, 170–179, 183–187, in the main from Chapter 5: Sense Made Sensuous and Synaesthesia in the Sight and Sound of Writing.

challenging and intriguing in the poem. In some vertiginous regards, this epiphany encapsulates the *Paradiso* as a whole by staging its ultimate goal – the divine vision – self-reflexively in a *mise-en-abîme* as an instance of the writing of letters.

That God should be “seen” in the form of writing, however, already hints at the impossibility of the vision of God that motivates the trajectory of the *Commedia* as a whole and of the *Paradiso* in particular. Writing, language, poetry are means for mediating experience and not its end or object in themselves. That the vision turns out to be a vision of writing hints that it is actually objectless and that only its literary vehicle and means are concretely present and perceived. There is thus a negative theological message implicit in Dante’s “vision.” What Dante sees enables him to intuit what he cannot see, and the latter is the ultimate “revelation” conferred by the poem. The miraculous revelations to which the poem witnesses are thus couched in an acknowledgment of God’s transcendence of all that finite being and intellect see and know.

## 1. Sense Made Sensuous in the Sight and Sound of Writing

The apotheosis of sense or meaning as the final moment of language, whether in the stream of speech or in the sequence of writing, is dramatized spectacularly in the explosive transformations of the last letter –M– of the theme-sentence that Dante selects from the Book of Wisdom and lights up with the soul-sparks in the Heaven of Jupiter. Once the conceptual sense of the sentence has been realized with the appearance of the final letter, this Gothic insignia M metamorphoses into two successive pictorial emblems – first, the lily and then the eagle’s head and neck (“la testa e ’l collo,” XVIII, 108) and wings or body, as depicted. The latter pictogram sensuously and holistically displays, in visual phantasmagoria, the meaning and majesty of Empire. It means, and superessentially is, Justice: it emblemizes Dante’s utopian vision of the ideal state.

In Dante’s ideal vision, World Empire is itself made in the image of the perfect order of the created universe. Dante’s ideal of a universal World Government is modeled on God’s own intrinsic order and unity in the spiritual heaven. Monarchy alone, Dante believes, can guarantee justice in history and society. He demonstrates this at length in the logical syllogisms of Book I of his political treatise *Monarchia*, as well as in his construction of universal history in *Convivio* IV, iii–v, and he recurs to this theme obsessively as a leitmotif throughout the *Commedia*.

The sense of the Scriptural sentence on justice and love addressed to the rulers of the earth is thereby rendered concrete in a symbolic language of imperial heraldry. The message of Scripture is converted into – and is transmitted by – the emblem of the eagle and its historical realization by Rome. Emerging as a metamorphosis of the M, this textual eagle is a transformation of writing in the final character

that, literally, “takes off” once the letters of the sentence are complete. The sense of the sentence – its meaning – is put into play and on display through sensations both visual and audible. Dante’s description insists on this, with its persistent pairing in a sustained parallelism of impressions in each of these sensory modalities. Dante pursues this transformation of sense – or meaning – into a supersensory type of sensation and presence by the alchemy of poetic language further in the subsequent cantos, XIX and XX, of the heaven of Jove that flesh out the intellectual meaning of the vision presented in XVIII, 70-117 by elaborating on its phenomenal form.

For Dante, the signs in the heaven of Jove are important as presences that can be sensed – that can be perceived by his physical senses. Marguerite Chiarenza calls the sign of the eagle a “real presence.”<sup>1</sup> This is true primarily in a metaphysical sense. Still, we must also recognize that, considered poetically, this presence is sensuously real in the modality not only of sight but also of hearing. The letters are presented throughout this heaven as sights in constant and explicit conjunction with sound and, furthermore, with movement. The holy creatures sang, but they also formed their collective shapes into choreographed flights of letters, “now D, now I, now L”:

sì dentro ai lumi sante creature  
 volitando cantavano, e faciensi  
 or D, or I, or L in sue figure.  
 (XVIII, 76–78)  
 (so within the holy lights creatures  
 flying sang, and made themselves  
 now D, now I, now L in its figures.)

This suggests that sight and sound and kinetics belong originally together and are only artificially, or analytically, distinguished. Nothing more specific is said as to what the holy creatures sang. Presumably it was, in one way or another, the ineffable God. In any case, we can assume that it would have been integral to what they then make visibly manifest, especially considering the symmetrical coordination of sight and sound that governs the *cantica* all throughout, from the first canto – with its flood of light taken in together with the music of the spheres (I, 82). Dante’s senses of both sight and hearing are overwhelmed by such novel sensations beyond what is normally possible for human perception. A desire unprecedented in its acuteness to know their cause awakens in him:

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<sup>1</sup> Chiarenza, “Canto XX,” 301. These terms are made even more resonant by George Steiner’s *Real Presences*, an eloquent rebuttal to Jacques Derrida’s attack on the metaphysics of presence. Steiner is inspired by the power of presence as demonstrated in literature just such as this scene insisting on language as present through its literary form.

La novità del suono e 'l grande lume  
di lor cagion m'accesero un disio  
mai non sentito di cotanto acume.

(I, 82–84)

(The newness of the sound and the great light  
ignited in me a desire to know their cause  
never before felt with such acuteness.)

Taken as experience of the superessential reality of Paradise, what Dante records here as sensation is ambiguously intellection that can be expressed in diverse sensory modalities. The principles of such poetic composition, as well as of such a metaphysics and theophany, favor the song and its uncomprehended meaning's being as closely bound in unity as possible with what is then shown visually: meaning almost seems to dissolve into sensation. The grammar here, moreover, suggests that the letters are first sung and that subsequently each is made into "its" figure and becomes a written form and shape. The immediately following lines clearly distinguish two such moments or phases – the resolution into song and then into a figure that is sustained momentarily in silence:

Prima, cantando, a sua nota moviensi;  
poi, diventando l'un di questi segni,  
un poco s'arrestavano e taciensi.

(XVIII, 79–81)

(First, singing, they moved to its note,  
then, becoming one of these signs,  
they paused for a little and kept silent.)

The souls, singing, move first in time to its ("sua") – that is, the letter's (or possibly the song's) – note. Whatever it may mean for a letter to have "its" own note, such individual attunement of letters is familiar from the Kabbalah's letters, with their numerical valences, and is not unlike certain Pythagorean conceptions of universal harmonics. This lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic manifestation of the letter then metamorphoses into a spatial image recognizable as one of the chosen letters of the alphabet. At this stage, stasis and silence are reached, which consistently mark the moment in which meaning can finally be construed, even in the representations of heaven.

Music and motion culminate in silence and stasis: the phenomenon is consummated by its own negation. This must be the case in order to signify supersensory perception, since such perception can only be constituted dialectically by a negation of ordinary sense perception. Dante's text does not offer unequivocal resolutions but rather vibrates between voice and written character or inscription, between sound and sight. The two are perceived as inextricable from one another, each somehow

necessarily referring to and calling forth the other. The coextension, coordination, cohesion, and apparent coincidence of the sensory modes here hint that they are metaphors for supersensory experience such as Dante's intellection of Paradise can only be.

When Dante actually presents in his text the letters that are given to his vision in Paradise, the vision by which he beholds them is not simply vision in a literal sense. Ordinary empirical vision needs to be transcended or deconstructed in order that Dante's "visionary" experience, his written vision, can take place. Vision and audition here become finally metaphors for a supersensory experience of intellection. As merely physical, both sight and sound are equally inadequate and become self-destructing sensations.

Sight and sound in heaven, as intellectual sight and sound, are indeed interchangeable. In *De trinitate* XV, Augustine remarks that, "When, then, these things are done outwardly through the body, speech and sight are different things; inwardly, however, when we think, both are one. Similarly, hearing and seeing are two mutually diverse things in the bodily senses; however, in the mind, seeing and hearing are not different."<sup>2</sup> This inner relation of sight and sound in the mind becomes focused particularly in relation to the use of synaesthesia in Canto XX.

A theological grounding for Dante's undertaking can be found in the miracle of the Incarnation, whereby the ineffable divine Word becomes accessible to being seen and heard and touched. In many instances in the Gospels, Jesus's sensuous contact with others is treated with marvel and produces miracles. However, the Scriptural divine Word, too, in certain traditions, is held to produce sensory miracles. Dante's synaesthetic treatment of the supersensible becomes most intelligible within the tradition of the spiritual senses discerned in religious experience and particularly in reading Scripture.<sup>3</sup> There is, in this tradition, some speculation on the ineffable divine Word's being neither properly visible nor audible, though both sensory channels can be valid as ways of translating metaphorically what cannot be properly expressed. Talk of "vision" of the divine Word has the advantage of connoting an immediate apprehension of a totality. This is one essential aspect of how the illumination of the Word is understood to occur theologically. Of course, precisely the check to realizing total vision is what makes the finite created intellect transcend itself and jump to a higher sort of apprehension of what it cannot adequately know. The first reason or ground of things ("prima cagion") is exactly what created intellects do not see totally ("non veggion tota," XX, 132).

<sup>2</sup> Augustinus, *De trinitate*, XV, x, 18. "Foris enim cum per corpus haec fiunt aliud est locutio, aliud uisio; intus autem cum cogitamus utrumque unum est. Sicut auditio et uisio duo quaedam sunt inter se distantia in sensibus corporis, in animo autem non est aliud atque aliud uidere et audire."

<sup>3</sup> Traditional texts and backgrounds are presented in Gavrilyuk – Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses*.

Indeed, the *Paradiso*, in a peculiarly strict and conspicuous sense, is precisely about the invisible. The visual image is an index of something that is not properly visible. As with all imagery of Paradise, we must ask: Is the object then a kind of writing? It is, in the sense that it is significant, in the end, not for its perceptual qualities, but only for that which they index by virtue of the differences that signification engenders. This interpretation might seem to be dispelled by the lavishness and elegance and energy of this “writing” in images. Dante’s writing in the sky, moreover, neutralizes what we ordinarily expect as the property of all writing, namely, the interrupting of the transparency of speech. Dante’s skywriting conjures divine meaning (or presence) immediately and transparently out of the self-referentiality of signifiers and their highly performative signifying. Instead of relying on the conception of writing as a conventional, purely arbitrary, effaceable sign for bearing intellectual meaning, the concept of writing in play or at work in this heaven conspicuously mobilizes a sensory orgy of the written character shown off with “calligraphic” flourish.

Dante, of course, in ways recalling and at least indirectly influenced by Augustine, is generally anxious that the signifier not block or delay access to the signified. God, the ultimate significatum, must not be deflected or obscured by any opacities of language. And yet, here the opaque signifiers themselves become identical with the divine vision. The heaven of Jupiter in particular, and Dante’s poetry in general, give great emphasis to the sensible form of signifiers: they enact an apotheosis of the written letter. In this respect, Dante agrees with much contemporary theory of poetic language since Mallarmé, for which the materiality of the signifier is recognized as essential to the poeticality of language and to its visionary truth.

## 2. Metaphor and the Poetic Making of the Linguistic Substance of Paradise

The extraordinary status of the *Paradiso*’s signs as hypersensational is realized in the metaphors of Canto XIX. What they refer to is not always easily determinable, but their force lies in their sense rather than in their reference.<sup>4</sup> Dante’s imagery in this heaven, as in the *Paradiso* generally, is attenuated in its representational or referential application. By hypothesis, its ultimate object is unrepresentable. This does not mean that Dante is not speaking in perfectly definite terms about clearly conceptualizable objects but rather that these objects are themselves mentioned always only in

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<sup>4</sup> A distinction between sense or meaning (“Sinn”) and reference (“Bedeutung”) is made by Gottlob Frege (“Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” 25–50). Up to a certain point, this is the difference between connotation and denotation in terms of the Anglo-Saxon linguistic theory inaugurated by John Stuart Mill. The first is a meaning intrinsic to the word, what it conjures up and suggests to the mind when presented as word alone. The second is the extralinguistic object that the word denotes.



order to evoke further ineffable and unrepresentable “things.” Leveraging Neo-Platonic negative theology, Marco Ariani has explained this most cogently with regard to Dante’s use of metaphor or, more exactly, “transumptio” as a dissimilar similitude. Concerning the Heaven of Justice, specifically cantos XIX and XX, Ariani writes:

We are facing a true and proper imaginative system, a long, complex *transumptio* that crosses and connects the two cantos centering on a nuclear image from which the verbal texture radiates, that of an unimaginable liquid light occulted in the inscrutable splendor of divine Justice. Synaesthetic technique thus dominates the weave of these tentacular metaphorical systems with which Dante attempts the impossible: to “syllable” the emanation of being through domestic comparisons in the form of *dissimilar similitudes* taken from the metaphorical legacy of Neo-Platonism (plenitude, the sea, the fountain, the wave, the root). This technique is without recognizable precedents in the poetic tradition. One can find something analogous only in philosophical and theological sources, even if we must clearly realize that Dante surpasses their tendency to antimetaphorical diffidence by his intrepid exercise of fantasmatic images, convinced as he is that they are always impressed with the seal of informing divine light.<sup>5</sup>

Dante actually goes well beyond simple negation and enriches this first-order Neo-Platonic, or more exactly Plotinian, negative theology in creating a positive sensorium of his experience of Paradise. Indeed, there always has to be a positive theology working in tandem with every negative theology. This has remained a key postulate of Christian negative theology ever since Dionysius the Areopagite, who is often recognized as its founder. However, Dante creates a metaphorical universe based on the negative experience of finding himself face to face with the ineffable God. His positive theology thus lies on the far side of this negative experience, which he expresses and elaborates in the exquisite and intoxicating fantasies of the *Paradiso*. Dante uses the resources of poetry to elaborate a metaphorical paradise, or

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<sup>5</sup> “Siamo di fronte ad un vero e proprio sistema immaginale, una lunga, complessa *transumptio* che travalica e connette i due canti accentrando su un’immagine nucleare da cui irradia la testura verbale, quella di un’inimmaginabile luce liquida occultata nell’imperscrutabile splendore della Giustizia divina. La tecnica sinestetica domina dunque la filatura di questi tentacolari sistemi metaforici con i quali Dante tenta l’impossibile, sillabare il mistero dell’emanazione dell’essere con domestiche comparazioni in forma di *dissimiles similitudines* tratte dal lascito metaforico del Neo-Platonismo (il ripieno, il mare, la fontana, l’onda, la radice). Tecnica senza riconoscibili precedenti nella tradizione poetica, per la quale si può trovare qualcosa di analogo solo nelle fonti filosofiche e teologiche, anche se si deve avere ben chiaro che Dante ne supera la tendenziale diffidenza antimetaphorica per un impavido esercizio delle immagini fantasmatiche, convinto come è che vi siano sempre impressi i sigilli dell’informante luce divina” (Ariani, *Lux inaccessibilis*, 260–261).

a paradise of poetic metaphor, that is positively sensual, following up on his passage through the negative-theological moment of the ineffable. Comparable in this regard is John of the Cross, who arrives at sensuous poetic expression in and through his dark night of the soul in “La noche oscura.”

The Letter to Can Grande uses the word “metaphorismorum” to describe a mythic style of representation characteristic of Plato. A closely related aspect of Dante’s understanding of figurative language is captured in another term current in the Middle Ages: “transumptio.” The Letter to Can Grande elencates also “transumptivus” (XIII, 9.27) among the rhetorical modes employed in the *Paradiso*. Considered rhetorically, the *transumptio* is a fine flower of ornate style, both *ornatus facilis* and particularly *ornatus difficilis*.<sup>6</sup> The *transumptio* was often taken as master trope in the Middle Ages, following indications in the *Rhetorica nova*, attributed to Cicero. It is discussed at length by Geoffrey de Vinsauf in his *Poetria nova* (vv. 765–1093).<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, *transumptio* is studied intensively also in the thirteenth-century Bolognese school of *ars dictaminis* rhetoricians, particularly by Bene da Firenze and Boncompagno da Signa. *Transumptio* connotes especially a capacity to absorb all the figurative powers of language into one. Its basic metaphorical operation consists in “sumere ex alio” – summing up under another head.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that it is by the transfer to the improper that it becomes possible to unify a multiplicity. Pushing this to the extreme case, Buoncompagno’s *Rhetorica novissima* derives the *transumptio* originally from the Word of God.<sup>9</sup>

Fiorenzo Forti’s researches bring out the extent to which Dante’s use of the *transumptio* is far more vital than that of the rhetorical tradition. Forti compares it particularly with Boncompagno’s rhetorical use of *transumptio* for decorative purposes (“De transumptionibus que fiunt per imagines”): “With all the panache of Boncompagno, the rhetorical devices he disassembles and reassembles appear always mechanical in comparison with the most pallid instances in the Comedy” (“Con tutto l’estro di Boncompagno, i congegni retorici che egli va smontando e rimontando appaiono sempre meccanici a confronto del più pallido luogo della Commedia,” 122). Rather than codified images that belong to the immense medieval repertoire of symbolic systems, for example, those linking animals to moral qualities, Dante furnishes new metaphorical inventions, genuinely live metaphors.<sup>10</sup> Dante’s place of unparalleled originality in the history of literature needs to be accounted for also by his rediscovery and activation of the lively invention of metaphor. Dante makes this

<sup>6</sup> Forti, “La magnanimità verbale,” 106.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey de Vinsauf, “Poetria nova,” 221–231.

<sup>8</sup> Forti, “La magnanimità verbale,” 110.

<sup>9</sup> Buoncompagno, *Rhetorica novissima*.

<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Ledda (*Il bestiario dell’aldilà*) studies the immense richness and complexity of animal images in the Commedia. For ample background particularly on the series of bird similes brought to focus in the preceding section, see chapter 9: “Parole, visioni, scacchi: Immagini aviarie nel cielo di Giove,” 233–245.

codified rhetorical schema for the first time fully poetic, indeed the essence of poetry as the invention of a world in desire. As such, metaphor becomes tantamount to the “reinvention” of Paradise – literally, coming (venire) back (re) into (in) it. Dante's Paradise is, in effect, a paradise of poetic metaphor.

A model of Dante's use of *transumptio* singled out for citation by Forti is the description of the river of light said by Dante to deliver “shadowy prefaces” (“umbriferi prefazii”) of the divine vision:

E vidi lume in forma di rivera  
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive  
dipinte di mirabil primavera.  
Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive  
e d'ogni parte si mettean ne' fiori  
quasi rubin che oro circunscrive.  
Poi, come inebriate da li odori  
riprofondavan sé nel miro gurge  
e s'una intrava, un'altra n'uscita fori.

(XXX, 61–69)

(And I saw light in the form of a river  
refulgent with lightning, between two banks  
painted with miraculous springtide.  
And from this torrent stormed living sparks  
and in every part they produced flowers  
like rubies that gold circumscribes.  
And then, as if inebriated by the fragrances,  
they plunged back into the miraculous gorge,  
and if one entered in another came back out.)

This elaborately ornate passage certainly displays Dante's gothic sensibilities. But it also intimates the kind of knowledge of substantial, spiritual meaning that Dante's metaphors embody.

It had been observed already by early commentators such as Benvenuto da Imola that Dante's metaphors are all figural, that is, they are not just pleasing to aesthetic taste but have a substantive, didactic meaning as well. It was typical medieval exegetical practice to interpret all the elements of a complex imagined scene according to their discrete meanings. Dante's images seem susceptible of this sort of interpretation, though they also tend to remake all previously established meanings in light of the new whole that they themselves forge.

Dante's complexes of metaphor are also effectively mixed together, branching out into organic – even if uncontainable and only equivocally identifiable – wholes. The experience of God in Paradise is described as a feast, according to the recurrent

*convivio* motif, and also, most intensively, as a metaphorical seeing. The two semantic fields are fused together when Dante's eyes are said to drink from the river of light so as to be annealed for the vision of God: "as soon as from the water the eaves of my eyelids drunk" ("e sì come di lei bevve la gronda / de le palpebre mie," *Paradiso* XXX, 88–89). "Eaves" adds in a further architectural motif to this fusion of metaphorical constructions.

Metaphor is traditionally understood as "picture language" – "bildliche Sprache," as German says. Meaning is mediated by image and becomes sensuously concrete in untold and untellable ways. The transfers and transfusions typical of metaphors are forms of mediation, even mediation of an unattainable Immediacy. And mediation, as we have been arguing all along, becomes a master metaphor for the unconditional im-mediacy of divinity. Metaphor, to this extent, performs divinity in Dante's poem. The letter, taken as icon, as visible speech, becomes such a metaphorical performance in Dante's vision of writing.

### 3. Geometrical Imagery and Perspective Opening to Infinity in the Heaven of Jupiter

Dante's metaphorical imagination is also specifically geometrical in this sixth heaven, which features God as a Geometer turning his compass in the act of creating the world:

"Colui che volse il sesto  
a lo stremo del mondo, e dentro ad esso  
distinse tanto occulto e manifesto . . ."

(XIX, 40–42)

("He who turned the compass  
at the limit of the world, and within it  
distinguished so much that is hidden and manifest . . .")

Dante associates the sixth heaven with geometry programmatically in the *Convivio's* system of correspondences between the seven planetary heavens and the seven liberal arts. We must realize that these arts are not merely circumscribed areas of technical knowledge. They open upon the contemplation of the infinite. The geometrical point provides an image of the infinitely small and indivisible – and therefore not measurable. The impossibility of squaring the circle offers another (anti-) image of the impossible and, in principle, imageless, and therewith also another figure for divinity.

Si che tra 'l punto e lo cerchio sì come tra principio e fine si muove la Geometria, e questi due alla sua certezza repugnano: ché lo punto per la sua indivisibilitade è immensurabile, e lo cerchio per lo suo arco è impossibile a quadrare perfettamente, e però è impossibile a misurare a punto. E ancora: la Geometria è bianchissima, in quanto è senza macula d'errore e certissima per sé e per la sua ancella, che si chiama Perspettiva. (*Convivio* II, xiii, 27)  
 (Thus, Geometry moves between the point and the circle as between beginning and end, and these two are antithetical to its certainty, since the point on account of its indivisibility is immeasurable, and the circle because of its curvature is impossible to perfectly square and is thus impossible to measure exactly. Furthermore, Geometry is superlatively white inasmuch as without stain or error and superlatively certain in itself and through its handmaiden, which is called [the science of] Perspective.)

Space is the dimension and the medium of representation that geometry in its perfection employs in order to represent that which is, in principle, unrepresentable or “impossible.” It creates for the eye a perspective on what remains otherwise ungraspable for the mind. Geometrical imagery is concretely visual and spatial, and yet geometrical concepts open this spatial reality to an infinite dimension that cannot be concretely represented. This is what makes geometry apt for figuring divine Justice as incomprehensible. Justice is imagined by Dante as a matter of symmetries and balance, and geometrical figures furnish some of its most precise and intuitive expressions. Linear or central perspective, as it begins to enter medieval art with Giotto and his follower Pietro Cavallino, raises this issue acutely as the issue of divine versus human vision of justice.<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta intriguingly suggests that Dante reconciles the new modern aesthetic of painting based on the perspective of the subject, which begins to emerge in Giotto, with the medieval, Byzantine, theocentric aesthetic realized in the mosaics of Ravenna.<sup>12</sup> The perspective of the subject as first-person protagonist is affirmed with unprecedented force in Dante's poem. Yet true perspective remains God's rather than the human protagonist's. In the still medieval perspective of the mosaics, which has validity also for Dante, the direction of the regard is reversed so that the viewer is scrutinized by the divine view of the saints and Christ as Pantocrator looming above on the ceiling of the Ravennese Basilica Sant'Apollinare in Classe.

Perspective for Dante is thus instrumental to the realization of infinite, divine vision rather than simply replacing the latter by humanly calculable and controllable artifices. And yet, even if justice is divine, nevertheless its representation remains

<sup>11</sup> For a reading of this important transition in art history, see Parronchi, *Cavallini*.

<sup>12</sup> Mazzotta, *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 84, chapter VI: “Spettacolo e geometria della giustizia (Paradiso XVIII–XX): L'Europa e l'universalità di Roma,” 81–96.

human. In response to this predicament, Dante represents God himself as drawing, designing, and painting. Can God be apprehended as the source of our own representations? Can the limits of their human mediation, in some way, be neutralized and overcome? Can justice on earth, as done by humans, succeed in executing the divine will? How can the particularity of their perspectives be transcended? These questions are posed and made to be pressing issues by Dante's text.

Virgil's and Ovid's Roman epics remain national epics of a certain race or people. But Dante, as Mazzotta pertinently comments, takes up "a position beyond the idolatrous fascination with any particular place" and beyond the purview prescribed by the "myths of a specific culture" ("una posizione di estraneità da ogni fascinazione idolatrica con un particolare luogo o con i miti di una particolare cultura," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 94). The Heaven of Jupiter's economy of salvation, with its references to pagans (Riphaeus and Trajan) and Hindus (XIX, 70–72), relativizes Christian and Roman cultural chauvinism and turns Dante's work into a self-critical, open, dynamically global vision. The virtuous Ethiopian and the Persian are able to put to shame the righteous hypocrisy of those who "call out Christ, Christ!" ("gridan Cristo, Cristo," XIX, 103–14). These "outsiders," finally, are not overlooked: instead, they will themselves look down with the blessed in judgment on damned Christians. The opening of partial perspectives of particular peoples and civilizations, including the Roman and Christian, to reconciliation with universal humanity and cosmic destiny extends infinitely the scope of Dante's calling. Ensnared within his own well-defined Catholic Imperial culture, Dante nevertheless projects a self-critical, self-subverting universality open to other peoples and cultures and trained upon absolute otherness.<sup>13</sup>

Dante is certainly seeing and writing from a European perspective, yet he sees Europe as in relation to its others and as intrinsically penetrated by alterity. Christian European society is put to scorn by the Jew within, laughing at its typical hypocrisies (*Paradiso* V, 81), and it is defined from without, emblematically by Justinian's legal code, the *Corpus iuris civilis*, which Dante reminds us was forged in Byzantium at the extreme confine with Asia ("ne lo stremo dell'Europa," *Paradiso* VI, 5). This legal constitution is framed by an Emperor under the sway of the Eastern heresy of Monophysitism. Europe is constituted by heterogeneity not only outside its porous borders but also from within and at its own core. It is characterized not by static, seamless, self-identity but by the intrinsic contradictions and limits of its ownmost characteristics.

In Dante's vision, as Mazzotta understands it, Europe is defined spiritually by its characteristic philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence but also by the flaws and

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<sup>13</sup> Dante's peering beyond Europe, anticipating our own contemporary critiques of Eurocentrism, is documented and analyzed by Brenda Schildgen in *Dante and the Orient* and in "Dante and the Crusades," 95–125.

limits of a civilization for which knowledge is transgressive (Ulysses's passage) and love violent (Europa's rape). It is especially the self-critical knowledge of these limits that Dante underscores and that distinguishes him and the European *Geist*. Dante is acutely conscious of the bias built into any perspective, not least the European. Mazzotta elicits such insight from Dante: "since every perspective brings with it a self-limitation, he reflects on his own no less inevitable limits and on his own possible errors" ("perché ogni prospettiva comporta un'autolimitazione, egli riflette sui suoi non meno inevitabili limiti e sui suoi possibili errori," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 84).

The concluding sentence of Mazzotta's chapter on Jupiter and geometry, linking with the previous heaven of Mars and Dante's encounter with his great great grandfather Cacciaguida reviewing the Florentine past, expresses this deliberate delimitation of perspective within an open horizon in lapidary terms: "On the basis of Roman and Christian universality, the gaze of Dante rises up, and his poetry, which is the very voice of Western spirituality, exposes nakedly the belonging of every familiar, subjective perspective to the vast latitude of the Earth" ("Sulla scorta dell'universalità romana e cristiana, lo sguardo di Dante si solleva, e la sua poesia, che è la voce stessa della spiritualità dell'Occidente, mette a nudo l'appartenenza di ogni prospettiva familiare e soggettiva alla vasta latitudine della Terra," *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 96).

This naked self-exposure brings Dante's vast visionary outlook home to its rootedness in his own personal experience and encapsulates Dante's universalism without abstraction from his particular historical situatedness. Dante owns up to his own human and historical particularity in some disarming ways that are virtually unprecedented in the thoroughly Greek-influenced culture and language of his medieval civilization still based, to a large extent, on the idealism of Platonic ideas and Aristotelian essences. However, these admissions and acknowledgments become, paradoxically, means of fulfilling his universal vision.

Geometry is about perspective and, just like theology, enables us to distinguish between our own perspective, based on our own measures, and the incommensurable that lies beyond our coordinates. The limits of human measures and reason are self-critically met with and acknowledged in confronting that which is in "infinite excess" ("infinito eccesso") of them. We cannot measure the divine judgment with our short vision ("con la veduta corta d'una spanna," XIX, 81), just the span of a handbreadth (literally "spanna") in geometrical terms. Our lines and circles and spheres never comprehend the Whole. We cannot, with our short receptacle, fathom the Good without end that measures itself with itself alone:

E quince appar ch'ogne minor natura  
è corto recettacolo a quel bene  
che non ha fine e sé con sé misura.

(XIX,49-51)

(and thus it appears that every lesser nature

is an inadequate receptacle for that good  
which has no end and measures itself by itself alone.)

Yet the divine abyss, nevertheless, adheres to and informs the surface that we can map and draw – analogously to the way that theology, with its incalculable “ultimate concern” (Paul Tillich), subtends the measured reasoning of philosophical discourse (“l’abisso inerisce alla superficie, così come la teologia sottende il discorso filosofico”<sup>14</sup>). Human arts pushed to their limit collapse and open to unfathomable divine knowledge. An ungraspable depth undergirds any finite subject’s inevitably perspectival knowing.

Mazzotta emphasizes that the divine Geometer is an Artist and that an aesthetic outlook forges some kind of contact of this divine geometry with the human world. The design of the cosmos infinitely surpasses us, and yet we have our perspective for receiving it as an aesthetic experience. Our perspective does not, like God’s, command unlimited vision, nor does it enable us to create the universe. We are rather within it – under the mobile gaze of the divinities figured in the mosaics in Ravenna. Their infinite gaze follows us as viewers wherever we go and from whatever strictly limited angle we might choose to look.

This awareness of limitations makes the universal perspective of salvation history, which historically emanates from Europe, unable to totalize and close itself off as European but, instead, opens gateways upon other regions and cultures. The idea of salvation history itself, so dear to Western Christianity, derives from the Holy Land in Asia Minor. Thus the purported universality of its civilization breaks down in Europe’s own internal contradictions stemming inevitably from divergent human perspectives. Still, the projection of a truly universal divine perspective has been a persistent and irrepressible aspiration of European culture. Perspective, as *perspectiva artificialis*, is already announced in Giotto and Cavallini, but it is not yet confined by the limits of the subject. It remains open to a mobile and all-enveloping divine perspective that is envisaged and imagined, even though it is unattainable for a finite human subject – just as Dante reminds us in admonitions delivered from the height of the Heaven of Jupiter.

Geometries of self-enclosure break apart in Dante’s heavens: they are burst open to a Justice that is superhuman. It is not that Dante does not express the desire for completeness and perfection, but these values are imagined as attainable only in a comprehensiveness that includes everything that geometrical, geographical, and ideological or cultural limits would exclude. Dante’s “uni-verse” is a “turning into one” of the All that follows a curvature that only God can master. Thus, human perspective needs to be kept always open to infinite vision, to the vision of the Infinite,

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<sup>14</sup> Mazzotta, *Confine quasi orizzonte*, 91.



and that type of vision is always other than our own defined in finite terms, though we can indeed participate in it.

#### 4. From Representation of Mediation to the Unrepresentable and Im-mediate

Through the intricacies of the imagery of Dante's vision, God's appearing as letters in the theophany of the heaven of Jupiter thus transforms itself into God's appearing in the mediations of language. Usually mediation operates unobserved, as attention is focused on what is mediated, but Dante's linguistic, poetic, and theological vision features the means of mediation as its direct object. Nonetheless, it is not exactly the medium, or writing as such and as an object, that most fascinates him – and us – in the end. It is rather something that is not objectifiable – mediation itself in its infinity – that is the source of unlimited power and fascination both in the poetic *mise-en-scène* and in the universe that it models and enacts.

Grammar, as an analysis of language into its component parts, is ultimately aimed at letting the wholeness of sense spring forth from an articulation of the seamless stream of speech into the complexity of differentiated parts. Grammar is presented, in Dante's vision, not as a law governing its expressions, but as figuring in a playful display – the random play of sparks in speech, or of material elements in the inscription of letters. Miraculously, from these irrational sparkings and shootings, apparently just random scribbblings, the rational order of language in grammar rises up in all its ordered configuration of components comprising a spectacular unity and universal wholeness. The uncontrollable dynamism of the letter reveals itself to be the generating source of order in language. And this order presents an analogy for divine order in the universe as a whole, despite its apparent chaos from our inevitably limited perspective. By reflecting on itself in this way, language reflects a total order that ensures, however encrypted, an inscrutable justice in the universe. Writing, as the paradigm par excellence of such endless self-mediation, which is alone what can be a revelation of the whole and total, becomes the revelation of God, his self-manifestation here and now in the Heaven of Jupiter.

To my mind, what this text is saying is that the mediation taking place in language and specifically in writing, as projecting a unity of sense, is itself the presence of God such as it can be experienced and expressed in letters. In the vision of Dante's poem, God is directly experienced not as a distinctly representable individual but rather in and through the mutual connections of things that the poem brings home to us, the relations in and through which all things are created and become what they are (“ciascuna cosa qual ell'è diventa,” XX, 78). This kind of unity through interconnectedness is experienced paradigmatically in the case of writing as a differential

system. The structural linguistics of Saussure and the deconstructive critical reflection of Derrida are both discernible here in embryo and still as squarely ensconced in their originally theological matrices.

What Dante envisages in his vision of writing in the Heaven of Jupiter is indeed the presence or the appearing of God. God is present as the mediation that operates at every point in our language, as well as in the differential grammar of the Creation and of History as culminating in the providential Justice established by the Roman Empire as the image of a World Government that remains, however differently, imaginable still for us today. Divinity is made visible by Dante, above all, in writing, but that is because, qua mediation, writing is also essentially the substance of what we live in our lives as finite, signifying, sense-making creatures. We deal with one another and our world always only through mediations that are traversed by what to us is unmasterable contingency, and yet these mediations and contingencies, Dante maintains, belong to a higher unity or synthesis that is beyond what we can comprehend.

God is envisaged in the mediation of all things by one another, and the vision of God is attained through our experience of mediation. By presencing mediation in language as an object directly of vision – indeed of a prophetic, visionary experience – Dante expresses the recognition, which is made explicit in his declarations of ineffability, that the true nature of the divine in itself cannot but be imagined as im-mediacy. His vision of mediation negates itself and awakens him to the not-to-be-mediated absolute simplicity of the divine nature. When he exclaims to the sweet star (Jupiter) that it demonstrated to him how our (human) justice is actually the effect of heavenly justice, of “the heaven that you bejewel” –

O dolce stella, quali e quante gemme  
mi dimostraro che nostra giustizia  
effetto sia del ciel che tu ingemme!

(XVIII, 115–17)

(O sweet star, what gems, and in what numbers,  
demonstrated to me that our justice  
is the effect of the heaven that you bejewel!)

– what Dante presents is not simply mediation (the visible interplay of parts of speech, etc.), but also its negation in a (non-)vision, a declaration, of immediacy. What he actually sees is only an “effect.” Dante does not simply identify the divine with the mediations he sees – which would lead to a sort of idolatrous pantheism, or else to a secular atheism in the manner of Spinoza or Hegel, or perhaps, in our own age, to a totalizing informatics. Instead, he represents mediation in its own inherent negativity (like everything belonging to the created universe, the world of beings) as

pointing to an unrepresentable immediacy (Being, God), Whom he directly apostrophizes.

The letters in their immediacy as presences show Dante God's just ordering of the universe. This he cannot actually see, but the immediate presence of God's Word assures him of it. His direct address of the heaven mirrors its demonstrating to him immediately by its speaking presence that human justice is an effect of divine Justice – despite the manifest breaking up of the sentence and the composition of its letters out of apparently incoherent sparking. The presence of divinity in direct address, in the immediacy of language – more than any objectively formulated mediations of meaning – is the “demonstration.”<sup>15</sup>

In Dante's vision, and most forcefully through this linguistic address, the mediations of language are negated as mediations and are made rather to appear as immediate presences. Mediation and immediacy are thus made practically to coincide. In the terms of a tradition running exemplarily from John Scott Eriugena to Nicolas Cusanus, Dante's vision here presents a *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the tradition that also informed Hegel's dialectical thinking in its theistic version as based on the “negation of negation” (*negatio negationis*).<sup>16</sup>

By presenting mediations of language in the place that has been prepared supposedly for the unmediated vision of God, Dante suggests that God, the Unmediated, is to be seen in the mediations of language. At least this is so when the latter are seen in a perspective of infinity – *sub specie aeternitatis*. Still, the Unmediated does not finally appear per se in these mediations, which are only finite phenomena, but rather in their effacing themselves as mediations in order to gesture towards what they are not and cannot represent or mediate. God is, indeed, “seen” in mediation, but only in the moment in which it fails as mediation and opens up, breaking open from within, to the Unmediated.

What is seen of God are mediations – language, letters, writing, sparks. But these mediations are not content simply to be mediations. Taken as a whole, they call for and refer to the unmediated. God is what you do not see in the phenomena of the universe and of language. Nevertheless, these phenomena allow you to see that there is something more in relation to which they, as a whole, are negations. Mediations are revealed as transitory and negative in their own being, as dependent upon and referred to something other than themselves – the Unmediated and Whole. This Unmediated, paradoxically, becomes manifest as a material presence of the medium. In other words: Incarnation. The Roman Imperial Eagle incarnates, with the immediacy of an image, the whole history of the world as culminating in a universal order of divine Justice. In the eagle, Justice itself, which is normally but

<sup>15</sup> I elucidate this link between language and im-mediacy by leveraging the ultraphenomenological thinking of Levinas in Excursus Six of *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation*.

<sup>16</sup> Grotz, *Negationen des Absoluten*.

an abstract attribute, speaks presently as a kind of concrete presence or persona. Although just an abstract and emblematic sign in itself, the Eagle becomes a metaphor for the heightened reality of universal Justice incarnated historically, according to Dante's ideal, by the Roman Empire. Such trans-substantiation becomes possible, and is made actual, by the Eagle's real presence in Dante's vision.

Nevertheless, the mediation achieved in and performed by writing is inextricable from contingency and materiality. The order that writing displays is not just an ideal form of the mind but rather penetrates an intractably external and material reality. This order cannot simply be imposed by a subjective act of consciousness. Its creation requires and witnesses to the unlimited power of the divine Creator over all being, starting from its material roots.

## Conclusion

With its vision in the Heaven of Jove of the incipit of the Book Wisdom – DILIGITE IUSTITIAM / QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM –, the poem di-sports and dis-plays its Scriptural medium in order to stage-manage an experience through metaphor of the Unmediated, which is the Divine Vision. Dante witnesses the articulation of his medium into incomprehensible complexity. He nevertheless sees it as inscribing a higher order and as the best, or perhaps the only, means of conveying the transcendent wholeness and simplicity – the vision of God – that he has been given to envision and has thereby been incited to believe. His flaunting of his medium is designed, ultimately, to make it disappear as medium so that we are left face to face with at least the place prepared for the Unmediated.

Only mediation that subverts itself as mediation in order to become the metaphor of unmediated presence can produce (or rather prepare for) the appearing of God – theophany. The unmediated presence of God is the non/showing of the Unrepresentable that Dante never tires of acknowledging through obsessively repeated rehearsals of the ineffability topos. However, in this case, the Unrepresentable coincides with, or at least appears as, the negation of the totality of representations mediating the divine message and meaning of the whole poem. The technical virtuosity of Dante's descriptions runs through and plays out all the possibilities of representation to the limit where representation exhausts its possibilities and points beyond itself to what it cannot represent or even fathom – the ineffable. Yet, neither does the ineffability topos simply remain in place: it, too, has been made to turn vertiginously around the center that moves the sun and the other stars. Dante's poem thereby becomes a veritable performance of negative or apophatic theology dancing together with a cataphatic theology that lends God a phenomenologically appearing form as writing, as Holy Scripture. In this sense, the poem is a theophany.

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# The Antinomic Method of Gregory Palamas: Between Transcendence and Immanence, God's Essence and Energy, Single and Multiple Trinity

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**Abstract:** The article examines the theological method of antinomy and the conceptual solution to the problem of the ontological “gap” between transcendence and immanence of the Holy Trinity in the theological thought of the outstanding Byzantine theologian of the 14th century Gregory Palamas. The article analyzes how Palamas, in his patristic teaching on the distinction between the essence and energy of the Holy Trinity, substantiates the unity, trinity, and multiplicity of divine action in the world, and how he interprets this distinction in God's nature. Particular attention is paid to biblical and patristic analysis and the significance of Palama's methodological “triangle”: apophatic, cataphatic, antinomy; his understanding of the personal dimension of the energies of the hypostases of the Trinity, and the problem of the “simplicity” of the Triune God.

**Keywords:** Gregory Palamas, antinomy, essence, energy, apophatic, cataphatic

In theological thought, the problem of the ontological relationship between the transcendence of the consubstantial Holy Trinity and the immanence of the multiple world created by God, which is filled with His presence, occupies an exceptional place. The correct interpretation and conceptual solution of this problem has the pivotal importance for substantiating the fundamental truths about the creation of the world and the omnipresence of God in whole world, about the nature of God's Revelation and His Providence, the importance of spiritual life for human being, and the possibility of vital communication with God. This topic is very important for understanding the ecclesiological and sacramentological truth about the Church, the anthropological and epistemological foundations of the ontology of the spiritual and ascetic Christian life, a knowledge of God, participation in God's nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:4) and adoption (cf. John 1:12; Gal 3:26; 2 Cor 6:18) by the Heavenly Father. “Tension” between the absolute otherness of intratrinitarian relationships of divine hypostases in divine essence (*God in Se, ad intra, theologia*)<sup>1</sup> and, at the same

<sup>1</sup> The sphere of *theologia* considers the nature of God in the “hiddenness” of His intratrinitarian, essential being (*in Se*), beyond time, cause and purpose. The sphere of *oikonomia* is the existence of God in His “energetic” revelation (*ad extra*), actions or dynamic presence in created reality, in time and space, for a certain reason and purpose. On the apophatic dimension of God's existence in the theological thought of Gregory Palamas, see Жуковський, “Святий – ‘еретик’ Григорій Палама,” 569–592. About apophatic

time, the ontological familiarity of God in His revelation and providential presence in the world (God *pro nobis, ad extra, oikonomia*) thanks to divine grace, power and energy, is one of the central themes of theology.<sup>2</sup>

The theological explanation of the ontological “bridge” between the infinite ontological distance and, at the same time, the most intimate closeness of the Holy Trinity and a human being, between the transcendent and primordial God and the immanent and temporal reality that He fills. This is the key to understanding divine and worldly existence as an effective openness to dialogue, of mutual giving and acceptance, as opposed to the static and self-contained existence of God, the humankind and the world. Understanding these two dimensions of God’s nature is also the basis for understanding creation as dynamic harmony, mutual exchange, synergetic unity.

One of the most famous theologians of the Eastern Church, who contributed most to the solution of this fundamental problem, was Gregory Palamas<sup>3</sup> (1296–1359). His theology of the distinction between divine essence and energy of the Holy Trinity took shape in the polemic known as the Hesychast debates.<sup>4</sup> Palamas substantiated the patristic soteriology, according to which the main vocation of a human being consists in communion with the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) and personal participation in the Holy Trinity. Based on the patristic tradition regarding the distinction between God’s inner life and His revelation to the world,<sup>5</sup> Palamas substantiated the reality of the knowledge of God and the deification<sup>6</sup> of the human person. In his teaching, we trace a clear distinction between the sphere of *theologia* and *oikonomia*, God *in Se* and *ad extra*, between divine essence and energy,<sup>7</sup> which reveals the Trinity in

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theology in the Eastern Church see Begzos, “Apothaticism in the Theology,” 327–357; Harrison, “The Relation,” 318–332.

- 2 Cf. Гренц – Слоун, *Богословие и богословы*, 9. On the problem of “reconciliation” of transcendence and immanence in the context of the decisions of the seven ecumenical councils, see Mousalimas, “Immanence and Transcendence,” 375–380.
- 3 About the life of St. Gregory of Palamas, and the main aspects of his theological teaching see Meyendorff, *A Study*; Papademetriou, *Introduction*; Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” 131–188; Stiennon, “Bulletin sur le Palamisme,” 231–337; Barrois, “Palamism Revisited,” 211–231.
- 4 On the historical and theological canvas of the Hesychast controversy, see Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm*; Flogaus, “Palamas and Barlaam Revisited,” 1–32; Romanides, “Notes on the Palamite Controversy,” 186–205, 225–270; Ware, “The Debate about Palamism,” 45–63.
- 5 More about the conception of divine energies in Palamas’ theology see Жуковський, “Богослов’я енергий Григорія Палами,” 163–205; Maloney, *A Theology of “Uncreated Energies”*; Anastos, “Gregory Palamas,” 335–349; Coffey, “The Palamite Doctrine of God,” 329–358; Hussey, “The Persons-Energy Structure,” 22–43; Zimany, “The Divine Energies,” 281–285; van Rossum, “The λόγοι of Creation,” 213–217; Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 125–136.
- 6 About the knowledge of the Holy Trinity and the deification of the human being in the theology of Gregory Palamas see Tsirpanlis, “Epistemology, Theognosis,” 5–27.
- 7 More about the meaning of these concepts and their use in patristic theology see Жуковський, “Апофатична віддаленість і катафатична всюдисущність,” 40–60; Жуковський, “Творець і творіння,” 743–765; Жуковський, “Неосяжність Бога,” 783–800; Zhukovskyy, “Antiochia i Aleksandria,” 91–106; van Rossum, *Palamism and Church Tradition*; Aghiorgoussis, “Christian Existentialism,” 15–41; Contos, “The Essence-Energies Structure,” 283–294; Damian, “A Few Considerations,” 101–112; de Halleux,



the world. Such a distinction in God's nature, on the one hand, does not add the complexity to God's being, and on the other hand, it is characterized by different ontological dimensions of creative divine energies, the nature of which Palamas considers thanks to the antinomic methodology of the apophatic and cataphatic approach. The purpose of this article is to consider the main aspects of the antinomic method of Gregory Palamas in his teaching on the distinction between the essence and energy of the Holy Trinity. In this context, we will pay attention to the three main dimensions of the energetic revelation of the Triune God: unity, trinity and multiplicity; to Palama's teaching about the simultaneous essence-energy distinction and simplicity of the consubstantial Trinity; the importance and meaning of the methodological "triangle" of Gregory's doctrine about the hidden and revealed God, where the main sides are: antinomy, apophatic and kataphatic.

## 1. The Unity of the Divine Energy of the Holy Trinity

In his Triadology, Palamas emphasizes the unity of the Holy Trinity, and, at the same time, he highlights the three levels of God's nature, saying that there are "three realities in God, namely, substance, energy and a Trinity of divine hypostases."<sup>8</sup> That is, in the divine being we distinguish not only essence and energy, but also energy and hypostasis.<sup>9</sup> At all these levels we are dealing with the one and triune God both in the integrity of His inner-hypostatic being and in the energetic manifestation in creation. The central point of this teaching is the unity of the divine hypostases in their action *ad extra*, according to which "divine energy is shared by three hypostases. Their interpenetration ensures that one and the same energy is at work, unfolding from the Father and manifesting through the mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit. The eternal "circulation" of divine energy is concretized in the *oikonomia* through the specific activity of each hypostasis, which performs the common work of creation and restoration of the universe. Such unity in action has no equivalent in the created world. When the Spirit comes and dwells in the hearts of the faithful, then it is God in all its fullness, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are present and renew them."<sup>10</sup>

Palamas, considering the nature of divine providence, creative and preserving power, and various dimensions of divine energy that completes, animates, and supports all creation, notes that each of these powers "is common to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And according to each good and divine volition in our

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"Palamisme et Tradition," 479–493; Grondijs, "The Patristic Origins," 323–328; Habra, "The Sources of the Doctrine," 244–252; Patacsi, "Palamism before Palamas," 64–71.

<sup>8</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 75, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Ware, "God Hidden and Revealed," 133–134.

<sup>10</sup> Lison, *L'Esprit Répandu*, 99.

regard the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are identical with the energy and power which bestows substance, life and wisdom.”<sup>11</sup> The mysterious, inner-divine existence is revealed as the common life of each person of the Holy Trinity. The Divine life, on the one hand, remains absolutely hidden, in the depth of the essential mystery of hypostatic relationships, and on the other hand, it is revealed as the concrete personal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each God’s hypostasis reveals himself to the world as a common divine energy for the Holy Trinity.<sup>12</sup>

The source of energy is not one of the hypostases, but the three-hypostatic and one-essence nature of God. Therefore, Palamas also calls energy natural and essential.<sup>13</sup> The Triune God in his fullness and integrity acts through energies. “God is in Himself, and at the same time, the three divine hypostases are essentially, integrally, substantially contained in each other, without any mixing or division, and therefore their energy is common.”<sup>14</sup> Palamas warns against a false rational approach in the interpretation of energetic unity, according to which the commonality of energy is understood exclusively in the sense of “similarity.” This approach is wrong, given the fact that even in numerical terms, uncreated energy is common to the three hypostases of God.<sup>15</sup> That is why in each person of the Holy Trinity there is “one motion and energy, the life or power which the Father possesses within himself is not other than the Son since he possesses a life and power identical with the Father, and similarly in the case of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> The Triune God is life in itself, absolutely possesses of His own energy. The divine hypostases are life-giving life for a human person “by reason and by energy.” Life is given to a human being by common, for three hypostases, energy.<sup>17</sup> Using only two of the ten Aristotelian categories, namely: “essence” and “relatives,” Palamas interprets the divine being not only as a single and abstract essence of the Trinity, but also as an energetic relation to all creation, without which God “neither is he principle, Creator and master, nor is he our Father.” “Relationship” (which is impossible without energy) becomes one of Palama’s fundamental concepts in his interpretation of the divine “energetic” phenomenon, creative and life-giving presence in the world.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to the common energy of the persons of the Trinity, a human person can know who God is.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, God energetically presents himself as Father, Son, and Spirit not through an inaccessible essence, but through a single and common energy of the three hypostases.<sup>20</sup>

11 Palamas, *Capita* 91, 191.

12 Palamas, *De processione* II, 19–21, 95–97.

13 Cf. Palamas, *De processione* II, 69, 141.

14 Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 141.

15 Cf. Palamas, *Capita* 137–138, 243, 245.

16 Palamas, *Capita* 113, 213.

17 Cf. Palamas, *Capita* 114, 213, 215.

18 Cf. Palamas, *Capita* 134, 239, 241.

19 Cf. Palamas, *Dialogue*, 41, 80.

20 Cf. Palamas, *Dialogue*, 40, 79.

Palamas, considering the issue of the unity and commonality of the three hypostases and their divine energy, notes that unlike created beings, in which each has its own “energy” and “acts on its own,” for the divine hypostases “the energy is truly one and the same, for the motion of the divine will is unique in its origin from the primary cause in the Father, in its procession through the Son and in its manifestation in the Holy Spirit. This is clear from the created effects, for every natural energy is known in this way.”<sup>21</sup> In this text, in addition to the unity of natural or essential energy, Palamas also emphasizes another characteristic feature of divine energy, which means precisely the personal nature of the activity of the Holy Trinity in the world. The energy of God is the personal (ἐνυπόστατος) energy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The unity of God’s energy is personal.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, another dimension of the nature of the energy of the Triune God is precisely its personal presence in the world, which reveals God not as an abstract and impersonal entity, but as a personal living God who opens himself to a human person and is in a dialogic relationship with his.

## 2. Personal Dimension of Divine Energy

Along with the trinity of theophanies, the personal nature of divine energy is one of the most essential characteristics of the revelation and omnipresence of the Holy Trinity in the world. God’s energetic manifestations have a personal character, they are not impersonal and faceless emanations of essence. Energy represents the person of the Father, the person of the Son, and the person of the Holy Spirit, which are different from the substance that does not possess an independent personal being.<sup>23</sup>

The Triune God in his fullness and integrity resides in every divine hypostasis. The energies of God are the energies of each hypostasis, which are in the unity of the perichoretic relationships of the Holy Trinity. Speaking antinomically, the energy of the Triune God is the only energy of the three consubstantial persons.<sup>24</sup> Developing the concept of the relationship between the uncreated energies and the hypostases of the Trinity, Palamas borrows from Leontius of Byzantium the concept of “ἐνυπόστατος” (to be in the person, personal).<sup>25</sup> Gregory, considering the enhypostatic characteristic of divine energies, proceeds from the real spiritual experience of

<sup>21</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 112, 211.

<sup>22</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 112, 211.

<sup>23</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 137, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Lison, *L'Esprit Répandu*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> About the concept of “ἐνυπόστατος” see Daley, “A Richer Union,” 239–265; Ferrara, “Hypostatized in the Logos,” 311–327; Gleede, *The Development*; Lang, “Anhypostatos–Enhypostatos,” 630–657; Zhyrkova, “Leontius of Byzantium,” 193–218.

Christian ascetics, who in their spiritual feat contemplated the light of divine glory precisely in the “enhypostatic way.”<sup>26</sup> Palamas integrates the widespread patristic approach of the early Church to the understanding of the manifestation of the triune God’s nature in the world (according to which the Son and the Holy Spirit are accessible dimensions of the divine nature, while the Father remained unreachable) with the already developed doctrine of consubstantial Trinity, where the intra-divine relationships of the divine persons are interpreted as mutual participation of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the inaccessible essence of the Father.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Palamas calls the Son and the Spirit “hypostatic energies” of God, which are distinct from the enhypostatic energies of the Holy Trinity, and through which God manifests Himself in the world.<sup>28</sup> “Not solely the Only-Begotten of God but also the Holy Spirit is called energy and power by the saints, just as they possess the same powers and energies in exactly the same way as the Father, since [...] God is called power.”<sup>29</sup> Emphasizing the enhypostatic dimension of the power and wisdom of God, Palamas does not forget to remind about the other side of the truth, namely the unity and community of enhypostatic power and wisdom for the three persons of the Holy Trinity.<sup>30</sup> “Anhypostasis (ἀνυπόστατον)” of energies does not mean that they are impersonal, but rather that they must be distinguished from the hypostatic dimension of the divine being of the Trinity. These energies are not the fourth person of the Triune God. The Trinity is their source of origin. The term “ἐνυπόστατος” expresses the dependence of energies on the God-Trinity, who in his completeness, integrity and simplicity energetically appears in every hypostasis.<sup>31</sup>

Developing the idea of the enhypostatic energy of the Holy Trinity, Palamas substantiates the possibility of the intimate personal communication between a human being and God, since the Trinity is revealed through energies on a personal level. The light of divine glory, as the energy of God, a Christian can contemplate not in its own hypostasis, which this light does not have, but in God’s hypostasis.<sup>32</sup> This light is hypostatic not because “it has its own hypostasis, but because the Spirit sends this [divine and heavenly] life into the hypostasis of another, where it is contemplated. Such is, in a proper sense, that which is contemplated enhypostatic, [that is] ... not in itself and not in essence, but in hypostasis.”<sup>33</sup> This term refers not only to the persons of the Holy Trinity and the divine energies but also to the human person, since it is through the energies of the persons of the Trinity that the human being participates

<sup>26</sup> Hussey, “The Persons-Energy Structure,” 24.

<sup>27</sup> Coffey, “The Palamite Doctrine of God,” 336.

<sup>28</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study*, 219.

<sup>29</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 122, 225.

<sup>30</sup> Palamas, *Dialogue*, 25, 65–66.

<sup>31</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 1, 17–19, 591–595.

<sup>33</sup> Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 1, 9, 573, 575.

in God's nature.<sup>34</sup> Thus, thanks to the enhypostatic energies, the dynamic process of human participation in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit takes place on the personal level: God's hypostases – the enhypostatic energies of the Holy Trinity – the personal energy of a human being – the human person. The human being, energetically participating in the nature of God and deifying, is really and directly uniting with the personal being of the Triune God. Common theurgical power and grace are enhypostatic, and this does not mean the independence. The light of deifying grace is enhypostatic. It remains with the persons from whom it originates.<sup>35</sup> Distinguishing between the unity of the Holy Trinity's energy and hypostatic nature of God, Palamas also emphasizes the diverse and multiform wisdom of God in His *oikonomia* toward the humankind.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. The Multiplicity of Energies of the Holy Trinity

The third characteristic of the energetic dimension of the triune nature of God is the multifacetedness of the omnipresent, all-pervading, creative, sustaining, saving, and adoring the presence of divine energy. Given the multidimensionality of God's activity in the world, and His life-giving gifts, we can speak of the multiplicity of energies of the triune God. Considering the variety of energetic charisms, Palamas constantly uses the plural when he writes about the energetic spiritual gifts that “flow” from God.<sup>37</sup> Gregory emphasizes the difference between the unity of the transcendent trinitarian divine being and the multiplicity of God's “energetic” dynamics. He uses a comparison often used in patristic theology with the image of one and indivisible sun and its many rays:

The divine transcendent being is never named in the plural. But the divine and uncreated grace and energy of God is divided indivisibly according to the image of the sun's ray which gives warmth, light, life, and increase, and sends its own radiance to those who are illuminated and manifests itself to the eyes of those who see. In this way, in the manner of an obscure image, the divine energy of God is called not only one but also many ... they are innumerable in their multitude. ... Therefore, the powers and energies of the divine Spirit are uncreated and because theology speaks of them in the plural they are indivisibly distinct from the one and altogether indivisible substance of the Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hussey, “The Persons-Energy Structure,” 26.

<sup>35</sup> Palamas, *Dialogue*, 26, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Palamas, *De processione* II, 62, 134.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Palamas, *De processione* II, 11, 87–88.

<sup>38</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 68, 163.

Emphasizing the multiplicity of divine energies, Palamas at the same time clarifies that such an understanding of God's penetration into the world should not be understood as the existence of many gods or spirits. To describe the variety of divine energetic manifestations in the world, we can use such words as "processions, manifestations and natural energies of the one Spirit and in each case the agent is one."<sup>39</sup> God is one, and His manifestations in the diversity of creation are many. One of the most important proofs of the divinity of these energetic "performances" is their eternal and uncreated nature. Emphasizing this characteristic of energies, Palamas also refers to the book of the prophet Micah, which speaks of divine origins from ancient times, from the eternity (cf. Mic 5:1). Turning to the patristic tradition, Gregory notes that these "origins" of God are before and beyond the ages: "His goings forth have been from the beginning, from an eternity of days. The divine Fathers explained that these 'going forth' are the energies of the Godhead, as the powers and energies are identical for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>40</sup> These diverse, kataphatic characteristics of the Triune God are the multiplicity of His energetic manifestations.<sup>41</sup> Palamas notes that "there is another distinction alongside that of the hypostases and a distinction belonging to the Godhead, for the distinction of the hypostases is not a distinction belonging to the Godhead. ... According to the divine processions and energies God is multiplied and enters multiplicity. ... The same procession is also processions; but at another point, the Divinity does not enter multiplicity – certainly not! – nor as God is he subject to distinction."<sup>42</sup>

The multiplicity of energies "that are around God" in no way leads to the existence of many divine beings. A great many energies originate from one and simple essence, each of which is uncreated.<sup>43</sup>

As we can see, the defining methodological tool of Gregory Palamas' approach to substantiating the theology of energies, and, at the same time, the "criterion of piety" is the method of antinomies. The entire problematic of the essential-energetic distinction in the single and triune nature of the personal God is unthinkable without this methodological key, which makes it possible to adequately interpret Gregory's patristic way to the simultaneous essential inaccessibility and energetic presence of God. The theological method of antinomies serves as the only adequate way of expressing the simple nature of God's triune existence and His multifaceted and personal presence in the created world. This Palamas' methodology helps to substantiate not only the preservation of the simplicity and unity of the personal existence and activity of God *ad extra*, with the simultaneous two-dimensionality of His nature, as well as to reconcile the simultaneous oneness of the Holy Trinity with the multiplicity

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<sup>39</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 71, 167.

<sup>40</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 72, 167.

<sup>41</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 117–118, 219.

<sup>42</sup> Palamas, *Capita* 85, 183.

<sup>43</sup> Palamas, *Dialogue*, 35, 74.

of everything that, thanks to His energies, the Lord created and providentially fills with love and good.

#### 4. The Essence and Energy vs the Problem of “Simplicity” of the Holy Trinity

Some modern critics of Palamas’ theological doctrine accuse him of teaching God’s energy as distinct from His essence, which violates the simplicity of the Holy Trinity by dividing God into two parts, leading to ditheism. Similar criticisms were also heard from Palama’s main opponent, theologian and humanistic scholar Barlaam of Calabria (c. 1290–1348).<sup>44</sup> In view of the multiplicity of divine energies, the criticism of the opponents goes as far as accusing Gregory of polytheism. This is one of the main criticisms of Palamas that have been made in the past and continue to be made by modern critics of his theology.<sup>45</sup> The correct interpretation of this question is important for an adequate perception of the holistic teaching of Gregory. The Council in Constantinople in 1351 adopted a separate resolution in which it confirmed the inviolability of divine simplicity, stressing that “the distinction between uncreated essence and energies in no way violates divine simplicity, there is no synthesis (*synthesis*) in God.”<sup>46</sup> This distinction is not only conceptual. It, being independent from our view, is a “real distinction (πραγματικὴ διάκρισις)” and exists “in the very natural order, that is, in the being of God.”<sup>47</sup> The “Synodal Tomos” also affirms that between God’s essence and energy there is “unity without confusion, distinction without division.” At the same time, God’s energies “remain always inseparable from the divine essence, eternally coexisting and inseparably united with it.”<sup>48</sup>

According to the teachings of Palamas, God does not lose his simplicity either because of the distinction of hypostases or because of the multiplicity of energies.<sup>49</sup> As God is fully present in each of the three hypostases without division, so He is completely and indivisible in each of His divine energies.<sup>50</sup> Energies are not some original and autonomous existence in themselves. They do not exist apart from God. Energies are God Himself, who manifests Himself through various activities in the world.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

<sup>45</sup> More about criticism of Palamas’ theology see Barrois, “Palamism Revisited,” 211–231.

<sup>46</sup> Barrois, “Palamism Revisited,” 130.

<sup>47</sup> Ware, “The Debate about Palamism,” 54.

<sup>48</sup> Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

<sup>49</sup> Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 148.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 2, 7, 655, 657.

<sup>51</sup> Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

According to the theological concept of Gregory Palamas, uncreated essence and uncreated energy are inseparable from each other. None of them is ever considered separately from the other. And this means, that there is one uncreated Deity in essence and energy.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, “even if we call the energy inseparable from the divine essence, still, God’s supersubstance will not become composite; otherwise, there would be no simple essence, since you will not see any natural essence without energy.”<sup>53</sup> This inseparability of God’s substance from His non-hypostatic and non-autonomous energy explains the absence of complexity in God.<sup>54</sup> The simplicity of the divine being of the Holy Trinity is not an abstract possession of the essence, which means a simple absence of complexity. God’s simplicity has a positive and dynamic meaning. As we have already seen above, one cannot use the Aristotelian term “accident” for energies, since it refers to a changing nature. Divine actions remain completely unchanged and do not introduce any complexity, regardless of their multiplicity and difference from one another.<sup>55</sup> Kallistos Ware, summarizing his reflections on the issue of the simplicity of the Triune God, notes that “one, only, living and active God is fully and completely present: on the level of ousia – in the complete simplicity of his divine being; at the level of hypostasis – in the triune distinction of divine persons; at the level of energeia – in the indivisible multiplicity of His creative and saving work.”<sup>56</sup>

In Palamas’ theology, God’s essence and energy, as God’s deifying grace, or, in other words, His emanations, manifestations, powers, and actions belong to one and indivisible divine nature, which is called the Godhead (*theotes*). The unity of the triune Godhead is not destroyed by His various activities in the world. Palamas, insisting on the simultaneous existence of a variety of eternal realities “around” God and the simplicity of the divine nature, notes that there are many things that “are essentially contemplated near God, but they in no way harm His unity and simplicity.”<sup>57</sup> Despite the multiplicity of energetic manifestations of the Holy Trinity, Palamas clearly emphasizes that Christians worship one, single and indivisible God who surpasses all complexity. The deifying grace of God and His other energies are one, one and the same Deity.

Accusing the defender of the hesychasts of ditheism or even polytheism, his opponents insisted that the essence-energy distinction “inevitably introduces complexity into God and makes Him composed of elements or parts, which contradicts His perfection.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, Gregory, in accordance with the patristic tradition, insists on

52 Palamas, *Dialogue*, 16, 57.

53 Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 1, 24, 603.

54 Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 149.

55 Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 149.

56 Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 136.

57 Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 1, 19, 595.

58 Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 147.



the simplicity and uncomplicated nature of God. Clement Lialine notes that “the most important property of distinction ... is that it does not destroy the divine simplicity and does not introduce any complexity. This fact is so fundamental to Palamism and was so strongly attacked by anti-Palamites that the Council of Constantinople in 1351 excommunicated anyone who held the opposite.”<sup>59</sup> For the main opponents of Palamas such a distinction violates the simplicity of God, and that is why they accused Palamas of dualism and polytheism.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the essential-energetic distinction in the nature of the Holy Trinity is not the result of any complexity or synthesis in the being of God. Nor does the distinction between the energies themselves add any complexity to His nature. Palamas rejects as baseless the accusations of confessing ditheism or polytheism.<sup>61</sup> The nature of God is not defined simply by comparing it with another being. He is not just single and simple, but simplicity itself.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Gregory, in response to the objections of his opponents, accuses them of ditheism in view of the fact that they defend the creation of divine energy, and thereby distinguish between the uncreated God “in essence” and the created God “in energy.” Palamas emphasizes the difference between his position and the approach of Barlaam and his supporters, who call uncreated divine grace created.<sup>63</sup> If the energetic revelation of God in the world is created, then we come to a contradiction, namely: God is more than one nature, that is, He is simultaneously created and uncreated, pre-eternal and time-based. This leads to the risk of worshiping two Gods: the created and the uncreated.<sup>64</sup> Gregory refutes this contradiction in God’s nature with arguments, noting that the energies are inseparable from the essence of the immutably simple and single Holy Trinity. Kallistos Ware emphasizes that the issue of God’s simplicity and, at the same time, essential-energetic distinction is the most difficult polemical point in Palamas’ discussion with his opponents. Moreover, for patristic thought the preservation of divine simplicity is no less important than for Palamas’ opponents. Between essence and energy there is “unity without fusion, distinction without division,” and in the one God this distinction is inexpressibly “*sui generis*, that which befits God.”<sup>65</sup>

As we can see, for Gregory Palamas, the real distinction between essence and energy, on the one hand, and energetic multifaceted manifestations in the world of divine being, on the other hand, do not contradict the simplicity of the Holy Trinity. There are two essential elements of Palamas’ approach to solving this fundamental problem of Christian theological thought. On the one hand, this is his clear

<sup>59</sup> Lialine, “The Theological Teaching of Gregory Palamas,” 275–276.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Contos, “The Essence-Energies Structure,” 287.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 147.

<sup>62</sup> Palamas, *Dialogue*, 55, 90.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Dialogue*, 9, 51–52.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Dialogue*, 12, 54.

<sup>65</sup> Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

distinction between kataphatic and apophatic methods of theology, and on the other hand, the question of traditional patristic antinomism in theology occupies a fundamental place. These two planes of Gregory's theological thought are decisive for a correct understanding of his teaching on the simplicity of the nature of the God-Trinity.

## **5. Palamas' Methodological Triangle: Apophatic, Kataphatic, Antinomy**

Considering Palamas' teaching about the divine nature of the Holy Trinity, which was formed and justified in a polemical context, two different approaches to the interpretation of the question of the simplicity of God's nature can be distinguished. First, the understanding of simplicity through the prism of the cataphatic method of theology. This method of interpretation uses positive definitions, terms, and analogies that, as far as possible, characterize who God is, depicting His nature through the highest degrees of affirmative verbal or symbolic expression. For this theological method, God is perfect and absolute Being, Goodness, Wisdom, Unity, Simplicity, Beauty, etc. In this case, all possible means of logic and language are used, with the help of which one can simply and unambiguously apply the method of analogical comparison between the imperfect, created being and the eternal, perfect divine being of the Trinity. For this theological way of interpreting the nature of God, it is essentially identical with the concept of a perfect and absolutized being. Accordingly, God's attributes and perfections, such as the unity and absolute simplicity of the Holy Trinity, analytically follow from the concept of perfect being. In turn, perfect being is tied to the field of logic. The main logical laws are understood as ontological and extend their effect to the interpretation of the existence of God. As a result, the one-sided cataphatic approach is characterized by the fact that any distinction in God's nature is perceived as a distinction in parts that are ontologically different from the whole God. And this is incompatible with the absolute perfection of God, since, logically thinking, each part is less perfect than the whole, and by its very existence violates the absolute perfection of the divinity of the Holy Trinity.<sup>66</sup> Obviously, this approach, on which the opponents of Palamas based their entire understanding of God's simplicity, is difficult to reconcile with the classical antinomic model of the patristic teaching about the nature of God, which has a clearly allogical, or, more precisely, supra-logical character. The antinomic method is alien to such a one-sided cataphatic and limited approach in theology.

Another approach belongs to the patristic understanding of the apophatic way of thinking about God, the importance of which is difficult to overestimate. Conscious

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<sup>66</sup> Krivoshein, "The Ascetic and Theological Teaching," 150.

ignoring of this method in the theological thought of Gregory, which he inherited from his predecessors, is one of the main reasons for the misunderstanding of Palamas' interpretation of the nature of the Holy Trinity by most opponents.<sup>67</sup> For Gregory Palamas, the apophatic way of understanding God's being does not contradict the kataphatic way. He criticizes those who try to deny the existence of an uncreated essence and energy in the nature of God through the apophatic method.<sup>68</sup> John Zizioulas, examining the apophatic way of thinking in Greek patristics, notes that this approach announced

the need to destroy and overcome the closed Greek ontology, because we cannot apply the concept of human mind or creation to denote God-Truth. The absolute otherness of God's being, which belongs to the very essence of biblical theology, is affirmed in such a way that the biblical approach to God is fundamentally different from the Greek one. Apophatism rejects the Greek view of truth, emphasizing that everything we know about being – that is, about creation – does not have to be ontologically identified with God. God has a simple, unknowable existence, which is unattainable for all things and absolutely ineffable, because He is beyond assertion and denial.<sup>69</sup>

According to the apophatic way of thinking about God, the description of God by concepts such as being and essence is imprecise and conditional, and does not describe God as He is in Himself. The Triune God, as the Creator, surpasses any being created by Him. Therefore, the characteristics of different dimensions of being cannot be one-sidedly, cataphatically, transferred to God, and considered as His characteristic properties. In the same way, the main logical laws can be extended to Him, cautiously and only to a limited extent. Essence and energy are only conditionally “parts” of the whole deity, since the whole of God in his creative activity is present in energy.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, the divine being of the Holy Trinity is completely different from various created types of being, and that is why it is incorrect to use both logical and rational tools, which are usually used for the analysis of various phenomena of created reality, and the results of the synthesis of the main approaches in their understanding. It is undoubtedly absurd to use discursive thinking and rational judgments regarding the mystery of divine simplicity. The essence-energy distinction is not a compromise with respect to the unity, wholeness, and simplicity of God. “Essence and energy are not ‘two parts’ of God, but rather two ‘modes’ or dimensions of divine existence. The simplicity of God is completely different from the concept of simplicity that is

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<sup>67</sup> Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 151.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Capita* 122–124, 225, 227.

<sup>69</sup> Зізіулас, *Буття як спілкування*, 90–91.

<sup>70</sup> Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 150–151.

inherent in our conceptual thinking, because God is more than existence, and therefore He is beyond any concept. Its simplicity is antinomian.”<sup>71</sup>

Divine energy does not exist outside of God. It is God Himself in His action and self-manifestation in time-space reality. Energy is full-fledged Deity, God in his wholeness. Kallistos Ware comments on it this way: “As God is fully present without diminution or division in each of the three persons, so is He, integrally and indivisible, present in each, in particular, and in all divine energies, in general.”<sup>72</sup> Palamas is clear and categorical when he insists on this very essential aspect in the doctrine of the energy of the Holy Trinity. He constantly emphasized that each power or energy of the Holy Trinity is not something original, hypostatic, and separately existing outside God, but it is God himself, the whole of God, in his action and openness to the world, which is completely and inseparably present in each of energies in which He can be contemplated in integrity.<sup>73</sup>

The method of antinomy in Palamas’ theological thought is a traditional patristic alternative to logical-discursive thinking. Such an expression as the “inseparably divided” being of the Holy Trinity is an appropriate way of verbalizing what the nature of God is. With the help of such over-logical language, Gregory depicts two sides of the same truth about the ineffability of the mystery of divine life. Instead of the essence-energy binary, we speak of one and indivisible Deity as the cause of all creation. Moreover, a real and even radical distinction between God’s concealed essence and His energetic manifestations in no way leads to ditheism or polytheism. God, at the same time – invisible and visible, nameless and the One who has names, it is impossible and possible to participate in Him.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, it is better to talk about divine indivisibility than about his simplicity. Because the God of Christians is “not the indistinguishable monad of the Platonists, but the unity and mutual communication of three persons who are in each other through the continuous movement of mutual love. His unity is [...] interpersonal unity.”<sup>75</sup> Palamas unequivocally emphasizes that “God does not lose his simplicity, both in view of the division and distinction of hypostases, and in view of the division and multiplicity of forces and energies.”<sup>76</sup>

We have already noted that the type of essence-energy distinction cannot be rationally compared with the multiplicity and diversity of created things and beings. The classification of the latter is carried out in accordance with the laws of logic and is completely inappropriate for the assessment of divine unity and multiplicity, since the distinction between the single essence and the multiplicity of God’s

71 Ryk, “The Holy Spirit’s Role,” 28.

72 Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

73 Palamas, *Pro sanctis* III, 2, 7, 657.

74 Palamas, *Dialogue*, 19, 60.

75 Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

76 Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

energies “must be understood in a manner peculiar to God,” and that this distinction is “proper to God” and ineffable in the same way that the divine unity is supernatural. Therefore, the expression “distinction according to God” is the best way of expressing the doctrine of the divine being of the Holy Trinity.<sup>77</sup>

## 6. Essence-Energy: Ontological or Epistemological Distinction?

The essential-energetic distinction in the theological thought of Gregory Palamas does not affect only the subjective epistemological level of the process of knowing God. It is not only the view of a human being and the product of weak and limited mind that conceptually distinguishes between these two levels in the nature of God. Rather, it is the reality of the ontological and objective level, which reveals the true distinction in the divine being of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, Palamas categorically asserts that this real distinction (πραγματική διάκρισις) is in no way a true separation.<sup>78</sup> As noted by Leonidas Contos, the essence-energy distinction is not an intellectual, but an ontological distinction, “which reveals the reality of ontological unity.”<sup>79</sup> It is based on the determinative relations analogous to those existing in the divine essence between the three hypostases. However, the relations that concern God’s nature cannot be interpreted in the way that is usually done in relation to the liaison between created things. That is, on the basis of any cause-and-effect distinctions between earthly objects, it is impossible to model distinctions in the nature of God by analogy.<sup>80</sup> Although the essence-energy distinction does not exist only in human understanding, nevertheless, to a certain extent, it can also be considered epistemological, as a derivative consequence of the real distinction in the nature of God. Palamas notes that in the patristic tradition it is not about the fact that essence and energy are one and the same thing, but rather that these two dimensions belong to one and triune God.<sup>81</sup>

Each energy of the Holy Trinity really means a different divine property, but they do not form different realities, being for all, the actions of one, single and living God.<sup>82</sup> In addition, divine simplicity is not an abstract characteristic of the essence, with the negative sign of the absence of complexity. “This is the primary attribute

<sup>77</sup> Krivoshein, “The Ascetic and Theological Teaching,” 152.

<sup>78</sup> About the use of these terms and their meanings see Guichardan, *Le problème de la Simplicité Divine*, 41–49; Grumel, “Grégoire Palamas,” 84–90.

<sup>79</sup> Contos, “The Essence-Energies Structure,” 286.

<sup>80</sup> Lialine, “The Theological Teaching of Gregory Palamas,” 275.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Meyendorff, *A Study*, 215.

<sup>82</sup> Meyendorff, *A Study*, 215.

of the supreme existence of the One Who is.”<sup>83</sup> The divine property of simplicity is the highest positive dimension of the existence of the Holy Trinity, the image of which man is unable to adequately express. The distinction between essence and energy in the nature of God, in contrast to the antipalamite criticism, reveals divine simplicity, depicting the divine being as one and simple, both in inner divine hiddenness and in energetic manifestation. This distinction does not threaten the absolute simplicity of God, but rather protects it.<sup>84</sup> Amphiloque Radović holds the same opinion when he notes that “the existence of energies in which the Deity is present everywhere does not destroy the simplicity of the divine being, but reveals it.”<sup>85</sup> God’s activity remains simple, because the Holy Trinity is the only Worker in all the multiplicity of His energies, the energies of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## Closing Remarks

The theological synthesis of Gregory Palamas is the culmination of the gradual development of the interpretation of the problem of the ontological “gap” between the transcendence and immanence of the Holy Trinity. Gregory clearly distinguishes between the apophatic sphere of theology, which considers the nature of God in its intratrinitarian, essential being *in Se*, beyond time, cause and purpose; and the cataphatic sphere of economy, the being of God in His energetic revelation *ad extra*, dynamic creative presence in time and space, with a view to a certain reason and for a specific purpose.

Palamas substantiated the theological sense of the need to distinguish between God’s essence and energy, and emphasized the personal dimension of the revelation of the Holy Trinity, which in its inner being is completely inaccessible and hidden. The meaning and significance of the epiphany derives from the very nature of God, who does not close himself in his self-sufficiency, but personally “going outside,” creates, supports and leads to the fullness of being a world that is completely different from himself. The God-Trinity reveals himself to man, allowing himself to be known, to participate in his nature and to be adored. The “energetic” substantiation of the cataphatic view of God shows Him not only as infinitely distant from the world and humankind, but also essentially present, penetrating and filling every element of the universe with deep meaning. Energy is the connecting link between the triune Creator and the multifaceted creation, through which everything created communicates with its Author in the measure, established by God, and not with some

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<sup>83</sup> Barrois, “Palamism Revisited,” 221–222.

<sup>84</sup> Barrois, “Palamism Revisited,” 221.

<sup>85</sup> Radović, *Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, 168.

inferior manifestation of Him, but with the fullness of His Divinity. The “energetic” theological problematic developed by Palamas is unthinkable without a methodological key that enables an adequate interpretation of Gregory’s patristic approach to the simultaneous essential inaccessibility and multifaceted energetic presence of God in creation. It is the antinomian way of thinking, as the “criterion of piety,” that serves as the only appropriate way of expressing the one-essence of God’s being of the Holy Trinity, both in inner mystery and in a single, personal and multiple revelation in the world. This method helps to substantiate not only the preservation of the simplicity and unity of God with the simultaneous two-dimensionality of His nature, but also to reconcile the unity of the Holy Trinity with the multiplicity of creative and providential activity of His energies in a world where God is in all places and filleth all things with his love: triune, personal and multifaceted.

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# The Source Antinomy of the Mystery of the Trinity as the Foundation and Hermeneutical Key of Christian Apophaticism in the View of Vladimir N. Lossky

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**Abstract:** For some time now, there has been a definite revival of interest in apophatic theology within religious thinking as well as at its antipodes. It often takes the form of criticism of religion, including Christian Revelation, and thus the theology based on it. From a Christian perspective, this provides an invitation to reflect on the rich heritage of apophaticism and to show its specificity as a consequence of what constitutes the *specificum christianorum*, i.e. the *Trinitatis mystery*. Important clues in this regard can be found in the thought of Vladimir N. Lossky, a prominent 20th century Orthodox theologian, a radical defender of the specific apophatic nature of Christianity and a theologian faithful to Trinitarian orthodoxy. Looking at the most important issues related to the Trinitarian dogma, we will point out that in the Russian's view, the Trinitarian antinomy is the source and foundation of Christian apophaticism and its hermeneutics. This conclusion will be based on revealing the Trinitarian antinomy as what is primordial, unconditioned by nothing, non-derivable from anything and therefore as a purely religious given and truth *par excellence*, accessible to man through Its free Revelation, which It also infinitely transcends.

**Keywords:** Vladimir N. Lossky, Trinity, antinomy, apophaticism, Orthodoxy

An interest in apophaticism seems to be noticeable today in many dimensions of human thought, culture, art, science – in a way, one could ascertain a kind of ubiquitous apophatic climate in the form of strongly influencing agnosticism and weak rationality. On the one hand, this is the result of the collapse of foundationist cognitive projects, and thus attempts to base patterns of life on them, which have since been identified as negatively fundamentalist; on the other hand, a strong awareness of the complexity of reality and the human experience of it in its multiple conditions, which has opened a space of mystery often where it seemed to be overcome. In the context of a specific “fascination with negative theology,” Robert Woźniak points to four reasons for it: the turn towards religious skepticism, the key meaning of the concept of difference in philosophy, the return to experience manifested

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by the privatisation and internalisation of religion, and the impact of the discovery and fascination with holistic religions of the East.<sup>1</sup> It seems that one could add here the renaissance of interest in occult and esoteric trends, even in the form of neognosis, or broadly understood mysticism. Stanisław Wszolek and Janusz Królikowski notice that,

for various reasons, there is a revival of interest in apophaticism [also – note M.P.] in theology today. Some are interested in it because they want to remain faithful to their own tradition – this is the case with Orthodox theologians; others try to rediscover apophaticism as a way of defining the possibilities and limits of reason in theological cognition of God; and still others see apophaticism as a way of entering into dialogue with those religious traditions that – at least at first glance – seem to have much in common with it, such as Buddhism. Without going into the evaluation of these proposals, we will deal with some issues, the consideration of which will help to determine the conditions for the meaningfulness of the apophatic discourse in theology.<sup>2</sup>

To this end, however, a more fundamental issue needs to be addressed, namely the problematic of the place and significance of apophysis in Christianity, after all Christian theology, even in its negative dimension, as a reflection *sui generis*, is derived from the *specificum christianorum*, which is the *Trinitatis mystery*. The purpose of this thesis will be to explicate the<sup>3</sup> antinomy of the mystery of the Trinity as the foundation and hermeneutical key of Christian apophaticism in the context of the thought of one of the most eminent Orthodox theologians of the 20th century, Vladimir N. Lossky, who is also one of the greatest defenders and promoters of the apophatic nature of Christianity and Christian theology *en bloc*.

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1 Woźniak, *Różnica*, 416.

2 Wszolek – Królikowski, *Teologia*, 109.

3 “[...] the term ‘antinomy’ is used either as a synonym of the word paradox or (quite often in Polish writing) more narrowly, to denote an unambiguous and formally correct proof of two mutually contradictory sentences. In this narrower sense, an antinomy is an unambiguously formulated paradox, the source of which is a – more or less hidden – contradiction of assumptions” (Bifat, “Antynomie w logice,” 18). “In der Philosophie heißt Antinomie der (scheinbar nicht aufzulösende) Widerspruch zwischen zwei Prinzipien oder Gesetzen, die sich zwar gleich gut begründen lassen, einander aber ausschließen [...]. In der Theologie führt die Notwendigkeit, alles Bedingte auf den Unbedingten als letzten Grund zurückzuführen, zur Gottesrede im Paradox (Coincidentia oppositorum)” (Vorgrimler, “Antinomismus,” 47). From the theological perspective, “antinomies, sometimes also called paradoxes, are formulas consisting of two seemingly contradictory statements, but both necessary to be maintained so that the fullness of faith is not compromised. A typical example of an antinomy is the dogma of the Holy Trinity, in which God is pronounced at the same time as absolute unity and tri-Personality, or the formula of Chalcedon about the union of natures in Christ” (Persidok, “W trosce,” 146).

## 1. Underlying the Revelation of the Trinitarian Antinomy

According to Vladimir Lossky, the apophatic attitude is not only a fundamental feature of all theological thought in the Eastern tradition,<sup>4</sup> but “aphophatism is, therefore, a criterion: the sure sign of an attitude of mind conformed to the truth. In this sense all true theology is fundamentally aphophatic,”<sup>5</sup> more: theopoietic-apophatic.<sup>6</sup> This applies to theology,<sup>7</sup> but not to its basis, truth, source, and thus ultimately the God-Trinity, who is beyond all negation and positivity,<sup>8</sup> as the primordial, non-derivable truth and foundation, within Whose Revelation we always find ourselves, and Who at the same time transcends this Revelation:

God is known in revelation as in personal relationship. Revelation is always revelation to someone; it is made up of encounters which order themselves into a history. Revelation in its totality is therefore; it is the reality of history, from creation to parousia. Revelation is thus a ‘theocosmic’ relationship which includes us. Not only can we now God outside it, but we cannot judge it “objectively” from outside. Revelation knows of no ‘outside’, for it is this relationship between God and the world within which, like it or not, we find ourselves. But in the immanence of revelation, God affirms Himself to be transcendent to creation. If one were to define as transcendent that which escapes the sphere of our knowledge and experience, one must say that God not only is not a part of world but even transcends His own revelation.<sup>9</sup>

The peak of historical Revelation is the dual economy of the Son and the Holy Spirit, in which it is God who reveals and gifts Himself as He is in Himself, that is, as Tri-Unity.<sup>10</sup> Lossky was aware that the explication of the Trinitarian richness contained in the self-revelation of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit was taking place in the Church gradually, not without resistance and not without blind corners, misconceptions or simply heresy. This, of course, raises the problem of the different understanding of the development-evolution of dogma in the East and the West,<sup>11</sup> which we will not address here, especially as it largely concerns the issue

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Płóciennik, “Teopoietyczno-apofatyczny,” *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> For Lossky, theology is not a purely intellectual-cognitive activity, but this dimension of theology always remains in the function of divinising union with God, hence it has a mystical character from beginning to end; Płóciennik, “Teopoietyczno-apofatyczny,” 118–138.

<sup>8</sup> “What will subsist beyond all negating or positing is the notion of the absolute hypostatic difference and the equally absolute identity of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit” (Lossky, “Apophasis and Trinitarian,” 16).

<sup>9</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> See Kupiec, “Pneumatologicznie ukierunkowana,” 267–279.

<sup>11</sup> See Hryniewicz, “Dogmatów ewolucja,” 18–19.

of dogmas promulgated after the schism of Christianity in the 11th century, and thus long after the last joint Council of East and West (which took place at Nicaea in 787).

Lossky notices the beginnings of Trinitarian theology already in the New Testament, especially in the writings of John. “[...] we must stress the evangelical roots of the orthodox triadology”<sup>12</sup> – states the Russian, thus strongly opposing any attempt to separate the Gospel and theology. “The chief source of our knowledge of the Trinity is, indeed, none other than the Prologue of St. John (and also the first epistle of the same) [...]”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Fathers commented on John’s Prologue with extraordinary frequency and referred to it, wanting to justify the truth about the Divinity of Christ and, at the same time, the Trinitarian existence of God.

From the first verse of the Prologue, the Father is called God, Christ is called the Word and the Word, in this beginning which is here not temporal but ontological is at once God („in the beginning...the Word was God”) and other than the Father („and the Word was with God”). These three affirmations of St. John: “In the beginning was the Word- and the Word was with God-and the Word was God”, constitute the germ of all trinitarian theology. They immediately direct our thought to the obligation of affirming, at the same time, the identity and the diversity of God.<sup>14</sup>

As for the Holy Spirit, without whom we can only speak of binary nature in God, “it is the Gospel that also reveals to us the Trinitarian ‘situation’ of the Holy Spirit as the Third Hypostasis in the Trinity, and those relations which emphasise His personal ‘singularity.’”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, Lossky refers to Jesus’ statements about the Holy Spirit in His farewell speech to the disciples (see John 14–17), particularly those fragments which indicate His personal separateness from the Father and the Son and, at the same time, His identity as to Divinity with the Father and the Son.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the biblical texts confront us with the antinomy of simultaneous identity and difference in God! “It is, of course, scandalous to break this antinomy by ‘rationalising’ this or that term” – notes Lossky, however, he is also aware that as a result of the paradoxical nature of this state of affairs, in the face of such an incomprehensible truth about God, the human mind, being helpless in the face of it tried to “rationalise” it, and “thus there have appeared, more or less explicitly, two major

<sup>12</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 36. Lossky (*ibidem*, 34–36) repeatedly emphasises the inseparability and interdependence of Christology and Trinitology.

<sup>15</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 38–39. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who makes it possible to know God in the fullness of His being, which is the Trinity – cf. Lossky, *The Mystical*, 246. “This is why, in Eastern rite, the day of Pentecost is called the festival of the Trinity” (*ibidem*, 239).

<sup>16</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 39.

heretical tendencies: Unitarianism Tritheism.”<sup>17</sup> And it is precisely because of this rationalising-extreme character, which cannot bear the mysterious tension of the antinomy, but which absolutises only one of its members at the expense of the other, thus robbing the mystery of its mystery, that it is worth taking a closer look at them, as well as at the way the Church has gone about overcoming them, while remaining faithful to its fundamental experience, attested and reflected in biblical texts.

## 2. Non-Apophatic Attempts to Rationalise the Trinitarian Antinomy: Unitarianism Tritheism

„Unitarianism has often assumed the aspect of an absolute monarchianism: there is only one person in God, that of the Father, Whose Son and Spirit are only emanations Or for ces.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the trend of monarchianism – since it is difficult to talk about any agreed doctrine – consisted of several different orientations, which were connected by the fact that they abolished the specific shape and salvific significance of the triune reality of the Revelation of God.<sup>19</sup> Its aim was to try to reconcile Christianity with Judaism, with its absolute monotheism, and Hellenistic philosophy, which favoured unity over plurality. At the same time, monarchianism appeared as a counter-reaction, or rather an attempt to correct, the subordinationist doctrine of the Logos, which, by introducing duality into God together with the Logos, threatened strict monotheism.

Many authors divide monarchianism into two of its branches: the dynamic (or Adoptionist) and the Modalistic (or Sabellian). In its dynamic-adoptionist form, this trend held that Jesus was a mere man who, at the moment of his baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, or at another moment of his life became the Son of God – thus negating the eternal Divine Sonship of Christ. In contrast, one of its main representatives, Paul of Samosata, additionally negates the personal separateness of the Father and the Son. Neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit possesses an existential separateness.<sup>20</sup>

However, according to Lossky, monarchianism took its “most perfect” form in the modalism of Sabellius (other representatives of the modalistic version of monarchianism were Noetus of Smyrna and Praxeas<sup>21</sup>). The Russian summarises his views

<sup>17</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 36–37.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Courth, *Der Gott*, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Płóciennik, “Teologia trynitarna,” 63.

<sup>21</sup> Hippolytus opposed the views of Noetus, see Hippolytus Romanus, *Contra Noetum*, and the teaching of Praxeas was opposed by Tertullian, see Tertullianus, *Prax.*

as follows: “For Sabbelius indeed, God is an impersonal essence which manifests itself diversely to the universe. The Tyree persons are then no longer anything but three successive modes of action, three appearances to the world of the same monad always simple in itself.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, at the moment of creation, God assumes the person of the Father, then incarnates as the Son, suffers and dies on the cross,<sup>23</sup> in order to rise from the dead and ascend to heaven to assume the person of the Holy Spirit. “At the Final Judgement, when the universe will be divinized, everything will enter into the indivisible monad.” It will happen because “This successive Trinity remains thus a pure appearance and in no way concerns the reality itself of God: here, nature completely absorbs the persons.”<sup>24</sup> To sum up: according to monarchianism in its Sabellian version, God is not a Trinity, but only reveals Himself as a Trinity, which means: firstly, that there is no consensus between who God is in Himself and what He makes Himself known as in Revelation, and secondly, that with such a vision of God, the possibility of true union with God, understood as divinisation, is negated. Modalism was, however, a tempting proposal, especially since, by situating the reality of God outside His revelation, or should we say revelations, which are equally relative to the impossibility of expressing God’s fullness *ad extra*, it gave the appearance of a truly apophatic attitude, respecting the mystery of God. We will return to the relationship between the Trinity and apophaticism many times in the course of our considerations, however, already on the basis of what we have said so far, it is clear that a truly biblical apophaticism not only does not abolish the Trinity in its divine being, nor does it establish it in God’s self-revelation, but rather it points to the mystery of God’s self-giving in the incomprehensibility of His intratrinitarian being, that is, as He is in Himself. Moreover, it allows God to reveal Himself in His own mystery, without reducing Him to the categories of human reason and human logic, without trying to enclose Him in them, but recognizes and submits to the antinomic fullness that splits all categories. Sabellianism was finally condemned by Pope Callistus,<sup>25</sup> which was also repeated by subsequent synods and first councils.

On the other hand, tritheism in its pure form, opposed to unitarianism, never appeared, as Lossky notes, mainly due to the obvious absurdity of the teaching about

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<sup>22</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Because of the attribution of suffering, crucifixion and death to the Father in the person of the Son, this view also became known as patripassianism.

<sup>24</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 37. The central error of Sabellian modalism consists in separating the linguistic plane in the doctrine of God from the ontic plane, leading to a relativisation of the fact that the Names of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit denote real Divine Persons, and not merely relative names given to God by Revelation, which have nothing to do with Him, as pointed out by St. Hilary of Poitiers – see Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 74–75. A contemporary version of Sabellian modalism is that proposed by John Hick with his vision of God as “The Real,” see Ledwoń, “...i nie ma w żadnym,” 282–287; Chrzanowski, “Pluralizm religijny,” 63–78; Strzyżyński, “Teologia apofatyczna.”

<sup>25</sup> See Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 75.



the manifold Trinity, or rather, about three Gods.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, there were strong tendencies that undermined the unity of the Trinity, based essentially on the hierarchical subordination of the Divine Persons, resulting in a refusal to give equal divine worship to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This subordinationist slant of Christian thought was particularly notable before the Council of Nicaea, i.e. before 325, and was conditioned by the application by the Ante-Nicene Fathers of the thought categories of Middle Platonism, or at least those based on it, to consider the Trinity, “so that one could not thereafter distinguished the Son except by subordinating Him. Divinity did not properly belong to Him; He only participated in the divine nature of the Father. The Logos thus became the instrument of the One, and the Holy Spirit in this turn served as an instrument for the Son whith which to sanctify of behalf to the Father.”<sup>27</sup> Among the Ante-Nicene theologians, especially permeated by subordinationism, Lossky emphasises the figure of Origen.<sup>28</sup> However, a clear distinction must be made between the intentionally orthodox subordinationism of the Ante-Nicene theologians, which was merely the result of a deficiency in the categories of thought used by the Fathers, and that of Arius at the beginning of the fourth century.<sup>29</sup> Our theologian sees the crux of the heresy of Arius in the fact that

Arius identified God and the Father, and claimed that all which is not Go dis created. The Son is therefore created, since He is other than Father, and the personal difference results in an ontological break. This created Son creates in His turn the Spirit, and the Trinity reverts to a hierarchy where the inferior serves as an instrument to the superior, and which is shot clean through by that insuperable gap which separates the created from the uncreated. Generation becomes creation, the Son and the Spirit, “grandsons”, who are creatures radically distinct from paternal divinity, and the triad only survives dividing the monad.<sup>30</sup>

Such an approach put the reality of *theosis* into question, because if the Son and the Holy Spirit do not have a divine nature, they cannot carry out the work of divinisation, moreover, instead of uniting with God, they distance themselves from Him. This was also the argumentation of the greatest defender of Christian orthodoxy in

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lossky, *Orthodox*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 37; see Szczurek, *Trójjedyny*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> When reading Lossky's writings, one can sometimes get the impression that he is trying to blame Origen for all the evil of various heresies and theological errors of the first centuries, which is not only unfair but also unfounded. Despite the many obvious shortcomings and gaps in Origen's system, his place in the development of Christian doctrine is irreplaceable, as evidenced by his straightforwardly gigantic influence on later patristics, including the pillars of the East – the Three Cappadocians. On Origen's trinitology, see Cruzel, *Origen*, 181–204.

<sup>29</sup> Hence William Hill's (*The Three-Personed*, 41) remark about Origen as a precursor of Arius – despite the truly Neoplatonic connotations of Origen's thoughts, after all, he was a student of Ammonius Saccas – is misplaced, or at least becomes ambiguous. A similar view can be found in Courth, *Der Gott*, 179.

<sup>30</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 37–38.

the dispute with Arianism – St. Athanasius, a participant in the Council of Nicaea and later the great apologist of his statements.<sup>31</sup> A council convened by the Emperor Constantine in Nicaea in 325 condemned Arius and recognised the divinity of Christ. However, the final settlement of the Arian case had to wait until 381, when the *Creed* was promulgated at the Council of Constantinople, today referred to as the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*, in which the Church expressed its faith in one divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Apophaticism of the Plurality of God

Thus, “faith, jealously preserved by the Church, seizes in a single movement, with a single adhesion, the unity and the diversity of God.”<sup>33</sup> Unity and diversity, which have coexisted in God for centuries, better: they are God who, in Revelation, becomes available to man and the world in the manner of a radical and total gift. “Our thought must be in continuous motion, pursuing now the one, now the three, and returning again to the unity; it must swing ceaselessly between the two poles of the antinomy, in order to attain to the contemplation of the sovereign repose of this threefold monad.”<sup>34</sup> Lossky stresses that

the contemplation of this absolute perfection, of this divine plenitude which is Trinity – God who is personal and who is not a person confined in his own self – the very thought, the mere “pale shade of the Trinity”, lifts the human soul beyond the order of being, changing and confused, in bestowing upon it this stability in the midst of passion; this serenity, or ἀπάθεια, which is the beginning of deification. For the creature, subject to change by nature, can by grace attain to state of eternal stability; can partake of infinite life in the light of the Trinity. This is why the Church so has defended so vehemently the mystery of the Holy Trinity to unity against the natural tendencies of the human mind, which strive to suppress it by reducing the Trinity to unity, in making it an essence of the philosophers with three modes of manifestation (the modalism of Sabellius), or even by dividing it into three distinct beings, as did Arius.<sup>35</sup>

This contemplation is the apophatic end “to which apophatic theology leads (if one can speak of an end at all where it is a journey towards infinity), this infinite end is not nature or essence, nor is it a person; it is something which at the same

31 See a study on the Trinitarian theology of St. Athanasius by Xavier Morales, *La théologie trinitaire*.

32 On the history of Arian disputes see Gliściński, *Współczesny Ojciec*; Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 88–114, 128–133.

33 Lossky, *Orthodox*, 38.

34 Lossky, *The Mystical*, 46.

35 Lossky, *The Mystical*, 48.

time transcends any notion of nature or person-Trinity.” Thus, as Lossky concludes, recalling the thought of St. Gregory of Nazianzus: “Τριάς- «name which unites things united by nature, and never allows those which are inseparable to be scattered by a number which separates».”<sup>36</sup> This way of talking about God, despite the use of numerical terms, is “rather more the denial or, better, the surmounting of number. Go dis «indentially Monad and Triad», said St. Maximus the Confessor. He is at once unitrinity and triunity, with the double equation of 1=3, of 3=1.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, despite referring to God a certain number, which ultimately cannot be other than “three,” after all.

two is number the number which separatek, three the number which transcendens all separation: the one and the many find themselves gathered and circumscribed in the Trinity. [...] In other words, there is no question here of a material number which serves for calculation and is in no wise applicable in the spirituals sphere, where there is no quantitative increase. The threefold number is not, as we commonly understand it, a quantity; when it relates to the indivisibly united divine hypostases, the ‘sum’ of which is always the unity, 3=1, it expresses the ineffable order within Godhead.<sup>38</sup>

The Russian theologian formulates his view on the basis of the following words of St. Basil the Great: “we do not count by addition, passing from the one to the many

<sup>36</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 47. The term “Trinity” is, of course, of extra-biblical origin. “The term ‘Trinity’ (*trias*) was first used – in a Gnostic text – by Theodotus of Byzantium (end of the 2nd century), and in ecclesiastical trinitology it was probably used by Theophilus of Antioch (second half of the 2nd century), speaking of God-Word-Wisdom, although one cannot see in this formulation the Father, Son and Spirit in the sense of later theology” (Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 68); the fragment in which Theophilus used the term “Trinity” is in his *Apology to Autolytus*, Theophilus Antiochenus, *Autol.* II, 15. In the West, the term “Trinity” was first used by Tertullian – it appears, among others, in several times in his *Against Praxeas*, however, perhaps best, in a clear and unambiguous way, how Tertullian understood and for what purpose he used them, he explains a fragment of his other work *On Decency*, where in the 21st chapter he writes: “Trinitas unius Divinitatis: Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus,” as cited in: Altaner – Stuiber, *Patrologie*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 48–47. Talking about the possibility of “summing up” the Divine Hypostases is inappropriate for two reasons. Firstly, these hypostases are not types of a species of Divine Hypostases to be grouped under a common term – each is infinitely different in its hypostasis, and only the imperfection of human language and the use of analogy to talk about them in any way leads to speaking of them under the collective name of the “Three Hypostases.” Secondly, each Hypostasis is the whole God and not a part of Him, moreover, the Three Hypostases are not more God than each of them individually, but exactly one and the same, better: the Divinity is one and complete-absolute without prejudice to each Hypostasis and without multiplication in all Three. Michael Palaiologos, in the confession of faith made during the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, which was intended to be a Council of Union after the East–West Schism, confessed: “We believe that each individual Person in the Trinity one true God, complete and perfect” (Denzinger, *The Sources*, no. 461; cited in accordance with the numbering). In the West, these issues came to the fore in the dispute between Peter Lombard and Joachim of Fiore, raised and resolved at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, see *ibidem*, nos. 431–433. Due to the supralogical and supranumerical nature of God, His trinity is pure revealed data, not derivable from anything prior, since there is no such thing, and any analogies found in creation are possible on the basis of the already given Revelation, and not as ways of proving it – see Florensky, *The Pillar*, 420–424.

by increase; we do not say: one, two, three, or first, second, third. “For I am God, the first, and I am the last”. Now we have never, even to the present time, heard of a second God; but adoring God of God, confessing the individuality of the hypostases, we dwell in the monarchy without dividing the theology into fragments.”<sup>39</sup>

Lossky also decides on his own, partly original, neo-patristic theo-philosophy of trinity, which is, however, and this must be strongly emphasised, an attempt to understand the revealed phenomenon-mystery of the trinity, and not an attempt to answer the fundamentally false question: why is God triune? (and not, e.g., dualistic or hexahedral?), or an impossible enterprise of extra-revelational arrival at the truth of the Tri-Unity. Let us quote it in its entirety, because as it turns out, many of its *implicite* theses will be explicated in the further part of our work, and only then will its depth be fully comprehensible.

The monad being unfolded, the personal plentitude of God cannot stabilize itself upon a dyad, because two implies opposition and reciprocal limitation. Two would divide the divine nature and would locate within the infinite the root of the indefinite, the first polarity of a creation which would become, as in the gnostic systems, manifestation. Divine reality is therefore unthinkable in two persons. The surmounting of two, that is, of number, occurs in three: not a return to the origin but a blossoming of personal being. Three in fact is not here the sum of an addition. Three absolutely diverse realities cannot be counted; three Absolutes do not add up together. Three, beyond all calculations, beyond all oppositions, establishes absolute diversity. Transcending number, it does not initiate nor enclose a series, but opens, beyond two, infinity: not the opacity of the in-itself, the absorption of a return to the One, but the open-ended infinity of the living God, the inexhaustible profusion of divine life. “The monad is set in motion by virtue of its richness; the dyad is surpassed, for divinity is above matter and form; the triad is enclosed within perfection, for it is the first to go beyond the composition of the dyad”. The mystery that Gregory of Nazianzus evokes in these Plotinian terms opens to us another domain beyond all logic and metaphysic. Faith here feeds and elevates thought beyond its limit unto a contemplation whose aim precisely is but to share in the divine life of the Trinity.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Apophatic Terminology of the Trinitarian Dogma

It would now be appropriate to look briefly at the terminology used by the Church to express the simultaneous unity and diversity in God, which was no less a problem

<sup>39</sup> Basilius Magnus, *Liber de Spiritu* XVIII, 45, as cited in: Lossky, *The Mystical*, 47–48.

<sup>40</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 44–45.

than the early Christian heresies and was the cause of much controversy and misunderstanding.

The Church used the term ὁμοῦσιος<sup>41</sup> to express the co-existence of the Three, the mysterious identity of the monad and the triad, the simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity of one nature and three hypostases. The term was based on the Greek word “ousia” (οὐσία), which, being a philosophical expression, “[...]” thought it was soon vulgarized to mean, for example, a «property» or a «category». It had

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical*, 48–49. The term was first used in the official interpretation of Christian doctrine at the Council of Nicaea to express the essential unity of the Father and the Son as to the Divinity: “We believe [...] in our one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God [...] of one substance with the Father (which they call in Greek ὁμoύσιoν)” (Denzinger, *The Sources*, no. 54). A number of controversies arose with the use of the term “homousios”: firstly, it was used by Paul of Samosata, preaching the views of adoptionist monarchianism we have mentioned, who understood by “homousios” the identity of the Father and the Son as excluding any difference between them. Secondly, this term was not found in the Bible and in connection with its use in the language of the Christian faith, the accusation of the Hellenisation of Christianity was raised (this accusation will be raised more than once in the history of Christianity, especially by widely understood Protestant theology – contemporary examples include Karl Barth’s criticism of the so-called *analogia entis* or Oscar Cullmann’s desire to dehellenise biblical eschatology by showing the Greek, and thus extra-biblical, origin of the idea of the soul’s immortality and opposing it to the biblical idea of resurrection). Lossky responds to the charge of the Hellenisation of the Christian faith as follows: “But theology must be of universal expressions. It is not accident that God placed the Fathers of the Church in a Greek setting; the demands for lucidity in philosophy and profundity in gnosis have forced them to the purify and to sanctify the language of the philosophers and of the mystics, to give to the Christian message, which includes but goes beyond Israel, all its universal reach” (Lossky, *Orthodox*, 30–31). Moreover, the Russian emphasises that: “The triumph of Christian thought is to have elaborated over the first four centuries, and particularly during fourth, «trinitarian» *par excellence*, a definition which gave to the heathen an inkling of the fullness of the Trinity: this was not the rationalization of Christianity but the Christianization of reason, a transmuting of philosophy into contemplation, a saturation of thought by a mystery which is not a secret to conceal, but an inexhaustible light” (*ibidem*, 38). Thus, on the one hand, we have a certain “providential” universalisation of the Gospel in the language of the philosophy of the time, preserving, on the other hand, a freedom from that Hellenistic thought due to the inadequacy between the mystery of Revelation and the language, any language and any philosophy, attempting to express it: “Revelation sets an abyss between the truth which it declares and the truths which can be discovered by philosophical speculation. [...] The mystery of the Trinity only becomes accessible to that ignorance which rises above all that can be contained within the concepts of the philosophers. Yet this *ignorantia*, not only *docta*, but charitable also, redescends again upon these concepts that it may mould them; that it may transform the expressions of human wisdom into the instruments of that Wisdom of God which is to the Greeks foolishness” (Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 49–50). Ultimately, Lossky (*Orthodox*, 35) states: “In a certain way, ancient thought prepares the way not only for Christianity, where it is superseded [*Logos spermatikos* St. Justin Martyr or *praeparatio evangelica* Eusebius of Caesarea – note M.P.] [...] That which is lacking in this thought, that which would be at once a chance of fulfillment and a stumbling-block for it, is the reality of the Incarnation” – where the divine and the human are united without confusion and without separation according to the pattern of Trinitarian unity and diversity. On the Hellenisation of Christianity and the Christianisation of Hellenism, see Klingler, “Tradycja,” 149–152. The in-growth of Christianised Hellenism into Byzantine theology is discussed by Evdokimov, *L’Orthodoxie*, 10–12. On the relationship between Greek philosophy and the theology of the Fathers, see Meyendorff, *Byzantine*, 23–25, who sees evidence for the fundamental dependence of philosophy on the principles of biblical Christianity in the doctrine of the East in the condemnation of Origenism in 553 (the year 543 is also given, although in this case we are dealing with a synod), cf. *ibidem*, 27.

an ontological resonance, derived as it is from the verb εἶμι, «to be», and could be well used to stress the ontological unity of divinity [...].<sup>42</sup> However, the use of this term within Christian dogma, however, did not happen unproblematically, by a mere transfer from the philosophical and social language of the Hellenes to the language of the Christian faith. After all, “ousia” had its rich history and a specific semantic connotation. This term was often used by Aristotle, who in Book V of his *Categories* gives the following definition: “That is principally, primarily and and property called οὐσία which is stated of no subject and which is in no subject – for example this man, or this horse. We call ‘secondo ousia’ (δεύτεραι οὐσίαι) those species wherein the ‘first ousias’ exist with their corresponding description: thus, ‘this man’ is specifically man and generically animal. Man and animal, then, are called ‘secondo ousias.’”<sup>43</sup>

There was also another non-philosophical word in common use, with a similar meaning to “ousia,” namely ὑπόστασις, which meant that which actually lasts, exists, and therefore existence (from the verb ὑφίσταμαι – to exist, literally stand under).<sup>44</sup> John of Damascus, in his *Dialectic*, juxtaposes these two terms, analysing their meaning.<sup>45</sup> It turns out that these terms were almost synonymous, and could mean both existence in a general sense and refer to individual substances. To confirm this, Lossky cites the position of Theodoret of Cyrus, according to whom secular philosophy does not distinguish between “ousia” and “hypostasis” due to their synonymy.<sup>46</sup> According to our author, “this relative equivalence was conducive to the development of a Christian terminology: after all, there was no previous context that could have disturbed the balance between the terms by which the holy Fathers wished to emphasise equal dignity: in this way the risk of giving meaning to an impersonal being could be avoided. In practice, ‘ousia’ and ‘hypostasis’ were originally synonymous; by giving each of these terms a separate meaning, the Fathers were free to root the person in

<sup>42</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Aristotelis, *Cat. V*, as cited in: Lossky, *The Mystical*, 50. On “ousia” (substance) in Aristotle’s philosophy, see Krąpiec, *Arystotelesowska*. The difficulty involved in directly applying Aristotle’s “ousia” to God was brilliantly expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas when he pointed out that “God belongs to no genus” (*Quod Deus non sit in aliquo tenere*). This thesis was developed in decisive places in both the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*. The key concept therein is the ‘genera,’ that is, the ten categories of the Aristotelian table. The categories, which include substance, quantity, quality, relative, place, time, action, affection, relative position and being in a position (of something) are an enumeration of the types of existence and predication. They list all the ways in which being is or can be at all. The way specifies being, but at the same time this specification limits and determines it. Thus, when Thomas states that ‘God belongs to no genus,’ he emphasises that existence does not belong to Him in any way. He is existence prior to all attribution. God is not ‘being’ in the way that all other beings are. Consequently, He is outside the realm of all possible conceptual judgement and predication. He cannot be comprehended or pronounced” (Dzidek, *Granice*, 35); Mrozek, “Kategorie,” 413–456.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical*, 50. “In everyday language, is designated subsistence, but among certain Stoics, it had assumed the sense of a distinct substance, of the individual” (Lossky, *Orthodox*, 41).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Joannes Damascenus, *Dialectica* XXXVIII–XXXIX, XLII.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Theodoretii Cyrenensis, *Immutabilis*, Dialogus I, 7–8.

being and personalise the ontology.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the genius of the Fathers led to the fact that what was synonymous came to mean the general – “ousia” and the particular – “hypostasis” in their simultaneity and equality in God, according to the above mentioned testimony of Theodoret.<sup>48</sup>

„Ousia, in the Trinity, is not an abstract idea of divinity, a national essence binding three divine individuals, as humanist for example is common to three men. Apophaticism gives in the metalogical depth of an unknowable transcendence the Bible envelopes it in the glorious radiance of the divine names.”<sup>49</sup>

With the term “hypostasis”<sup>50</sup> there was a great breakthrough in thinking – so the Fathers, contrary to the previous Greek thought, preferring unity and what is

<sup>47</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 41. Even the Council of Nicaea in 325 used the terms “hypostasis” and “ousia” synonymously, which led, especially in the period up to the Council of Constantinople in 381, to many linguistic misunderstandings. This was especially the case with translations from Greek into Latin and vice versa: the Greek “hypostasis” was translated by the Latin “substantia,” which resulted in accusing the East of tritheism; on the other hand, the Greeks saw modalist connotations in the Latin “persona” – see Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 267–272.

<sup>48</sup> It seems that the final definition and distinction between the “hypostasis” and “ousia” in relation to the Trinitarian mystery was made by St. Gregory of Nyssa, see Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ad Petrum*. On the authorship of this work, attributed for a long period of time to St. Basil, see Grodecki, “Autor i data,” 121–131. In the West, the terminology became established with Tertullian’s “una substantia tres personae”; see especially XII, 6–7 of his *Adversus Praxean* – it is precisely this terminological precision that Joseph Moingt (*Theologie trinitaire*, 399) considers Tertullian’s most important achievement and the greatest contribution to the development of the theology of the Trinity – it does not mean that this formula immediately and without reservation was accepted in the official pronouncements of the Church.

<sup>49</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 41. Thus, by no means an Aristotelian “ousia,” “the divine nature is like a sea of essence, indeterminate and without bounds, which spreads far and wide beyond all notion of time or of nature” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 36). On the use and understanding of the term “substance” – “ousia” in the theology of the early Church, see Pietras, “Pojęcie Bożej substancji,” 122–140.

<sup>50</sup> The word “hypostasis” was probably first used by Origen to denote – express distinctions in God, see Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 82. The Eastern Fathers ultimately opted precisely for the term “hypostasis,” while in the West the term “persona” was used, the equivalent of which in Greek was “prosopon.” The East saw the danger of Sabellianism in this term, because it was Sabellius who used it to define the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three modes of one substance. This understanding, moreover, was fostered by its theatrical roots – it meant the role of an actor, expressed by the mask such actor wore. However, as Andrea Milano (*Persona*, 61) notes, such a meaning appeared only secondarily, and originally these words meant “that which can be seen,” what is “conspicuous,” and thus expressed a certain only directly perceptible intuition; on the so-called “prosopographic exegesis,” see Andersen, “Zur Entstehung.” The Greek Fathers considered “prosopon” to be a term too weak to convey the real and not merely superficial “otherness” in God, which not only did not function in the milieu of Greek thought, and consequently in that language, but which had to be necessarily emphasised in antinomic unity with “homousios” in God, cf. Lossky, *Orthodox*, 41. “These misunderstandings were nevertheless dispelled. The term hypostasis, as expressing the notion of person in the concrete sense, passed to the West. The term *persona*, or πρόσωπον, was received and suitably interpreted in the East. Thus, in the freeing of men’s minds from natural limitations due to differences of mentality and culture, the catholicity of the Church was made manifest” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 52). Despite the mutual recognition of the terminological differences while maintaining the identical meaning and designation, “it turned out that finding good translations was not (and still is not) an easy task, since even the Council of Vienne (1311–1312) used the juxtaposition of the two terms, ‘hypostasis’ and ‘person’ (*hypostasis* and *persona*), treating them as synonyms” (Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 270).

general-universal over plurality, and thus what is diverse-different, they placed unity and plurality, and thus generality and particularity-otherness on the same-absolute plane in God, using synonymous terms, obviously subjected to Christian reinterpretation, and granted them ontic equality and equal meaning. Moreover, the complete *novum* of Christian thought is that “hypostasis” in a Trinitarian perspective

that a true advancement of thought emerges-it no longer contains anything individual. The individual is part of a species, or rather he is only a part of it: he divides the nature to which he belongs, he is the result of its atomization, so to say. There is nothing of the sort in the Trinity, where every hypostasis assumes in its fullness divine nature. Individuals are at once opposite and repetitive; each possesses its fraction of the nature; but indefinitely divided, it is always the same nature, without authentic diversity. The hypostases, on the other hand, are infinitely united and infinitely different: they *are* the divine nature, but not possess it, none breaks it to own exclusively. It is precisely because each one opens itself to the others, because the share nature without restriction, that the latter is not divided.<sup>51</sup>

Noteworthy is Lossky's emphasis on the infinite nature of the distinction that exists between the Divine Hypostases – if these are the Hypostases of the Infinite God, or rather, the Infinite God exists only in these Hypostases, better: these Three Hypostases are Each fully and all together one Infinite God, then not only unity has infinity, but also difference-otherness.

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On the concept of “person” in the early Church and in later theology, see, inter alia, Pałucki, “Pojęcie «osoby»,” 137–158; Szczyrba, “Teologiczny kontekst.” A detailed analysis of the formation and specification of the term “person” in the context of trinitology, especially in Western theology, along with his own proposal on the issue, is carried out by Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 74–216. It should be mentioned that due to the change in the meaning context of the term “person,” especially in the modern period – it is mainly about shifting the emphasis from the ontic dimension of the person towards the subject-psychological direction (a person is a conscious, free and self-possessed subject) – there is no shortage of thinkers in Western theology who propose not to remove the concept of “person” from the ecclesiastical nomenclature, but to reformulate the personalistic terminology towards one that is similar in meaning to the Greek “hypostasis.” The proposals of Karl Barth in his “Seinsweise” and Karl Rahner, who suggested the term “Subsistenzweise,” have become particularly well-known and discussed in recent years, cf. Piotrowski, “Traktat,” 277–282. Rahner's proposal along with all its aspects is of particular interest, and corresponds largely to the intuitions of Eastern theology and is rooted in the trinitology of the early Church – on this issue in Rahner's thought see, inter alia, Wilski, “«Osoba» w formule”; Hilberath, *Der Personbegriff*. Among the strong defenders of the concept of “person” in trinitology and opponents of introducing other terminology, one can mention the Polish theologian Czesław Bartnik (“Osoba w Trójcy”). In Orthodox theology, the thought of John Zizioulas is particularly noteworthy in this context, cf. Leśniewski, “Misterium osoby,” 77–97; Kowalczyk, “Dio esiste,” 81–102.

<sup>51</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 41–42. “Purged of its Aristotelian content, the theological notion of hypostasis in the thought of the eastern Fathers means not so much *individual as person*, in the modern sense of this word. [...] The philosophy of antiquity knew only human individuals” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 53).



[...] that the Father is not Son or Holy Spirit, that Son is not Father or Holy Spirit; that Holy Spirit is not Father or Son; but Father alone is Father, Son alone is Son, Holy Spirit alone is Holy Spirit. The Father alone begot the Son of His own substance; the Son alone was begotten of the Father alone; the Holy Spirit alone proceeds at the same time from the Father and Son. These three persons are one God, and not three gods, because the three have one substance, one essence, one nature, one divinity, one immensity, one eternity, where no opposition of relationship interferes

– this is how this truth was expressed by the Council of Florence in the *Decree for the Jacobites*, *nota bene* the next Council of Union after the schism.<sup>52</sup>

For the Fathers, indeed, personhood is freedom in relation to nature [...] Every attribute is repetitive, it belongs to nature and is found again among others individuals. Even a cluster of qualities can be found elsewhere. Personal uniqueness is what remains when one takes away all cosmic context, social and individual-all, indeed, that may be conceptualized. Eluding concepts, personhood cannot be defined. It is the incomparable, the wholly-other. One can only add up individuals, not persons. The person is always unique. The concept objectifies and collects. Only a thought methodically “deconceptualized” by apophasis can evoke the mystery of personhood. For that which remains irreducible to every nature cannot be defined, but only designated. It is only to be seized through a personal relationship, in a reciprocity [...].<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Denzinger, *The Sources*, no. 703. The last sentence of this fragment was read by many as a conciliar legitimisation and confirmation of the Western doctrine of the Divine Persons as relations – classical scholastic and neo-scholastic theology distinguished four relations in God: fatherhood, sonship, active spiration and passive spiration based on two origins: generation and *origination* – cf. Granat, *Bóg Jeden*, 348–390. Interestingly, Granat takes a sceptical position on the aforementioned fragment of the conciliar document, as well as on other statements by the Magisterium and theologians: “The doctrine of the existence of relations in God is not formally defined by the Church [...]” (*ibidem*, 380).

<sup>53</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 42–43. “This irretucibility cannot be understood expressed except in the relation of the Three Hypostases who, strictly speaking, are not «three» but «Three-Unity». In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the «divine hypostasis», we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases. They are alike in the fact that they are dissimilar; or, rather, to go beyond the relative idea of resemblance, which is out of place here, one must say that the absolute character of their difference implies an absolute identity. Beyond this one cannot speak of hypostases of Tri-Unity. Just as the Three is not an arithmetic number but indicates in the Triade of pure difference – a Triad which remains equal to the Monad – an infinite passage beyond the dyad of opposition, so the hypostasis as much, inasmuch as it is irreducible to the οὐσία, is no longer conceptual expression but a sign which is introduced into the domain of the non-generalizable, pointing out the radically personal character of the God of Christian revelation” (Lossky, *The Theological Notion*, 113). The aforementioned freedom of a person in relation to nature will, as it turns out, be the basis for addressing many of the extremely difficult theological issues concerning God’s relation to His self-giving *ad extra* and not only in Lossky’s thought, but, at the same time, it strongly questions the consistency of the apophatic approach, especially when it comes to questions of intra-Trinitarian relations in the Russian’s view – see Woźniak, “Metafizyka i Trójca,” 285, n. 49.

Thus, “Hypostasis” appears as a radically apophatic concept, concealing the mystery of absolute otherness in its infinite uniqueness and fullness.

### **Summary: the Apophatic Character of the Trinitarian Antinomy as the Foundation and Source of Christian Apophaticism**

Lossky stresses that “and this indivisible [divine – note M.P.] nature gives every hypostasis its depth, confirms its uniqueness, reveals itself in this unity of the unique, in this communion in which every person, without confusion, shares integrally in all the others: the more they are one the more they are diverse, since nothing of the communal nature escapes them; and the more they are diverse the more they are one, since their unity is not impersonal uniformity, but a fertile tension of irreducible diversity, an abundance of a ‘circumincession without mixture or confusion’ (St. John of Damascus).”<sup>54</sup>

In this last statement, the author of the *Dogmatic Theology* refers to the doctrine of intra-Trinitarian perichoresis, that is, the mutual indwelling, staying without confusion or fusion of the Divine Persons, so that “each one of the persons contains the unity by this relation to the others no less than by this relation to Himself.”<sup>55</sup> Lossky summarises Damascus’s view with the following comment: “Indeed, each of the three hypostases contains the unity, the one nature, after the manner proper to it, and which, in distinguishing it from the other two persons, recalls at the same time the indissoluble bond uniting the Three.”<sup>56</sup>

Thus, in formulating the dogma of the Trinity, the apophatic character of patristic thought was able while distinguishing between nature and hypostases to preserve their mysterious equivalence. In the words of St. Maximus, “God is identically Monad and Triad”. This is the end of the endless way: the limit of the limit less ascent; the Incomprehensibility reveals Himself in the very fact of His being incomprehensible, for his incomprehensibility is rooted in the fact that God is not only Nature but also Three Persons; the incomprehensible Nature is incomprehensible inasmuch as it is the Nature of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; God, incomprehensible because Trinity yet manifesting Himself as Trinity. Here apophaticism finds its fulfilment in the revelation of the Holy Trinity as primordial fact, ultimate reality, first datum which cannot be deduced, explained or discovered by way

<sup>54</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 24.

<sup>55</sup> Joannes Damascenus, *De fide orthodoxa* I, 8. The author points out that despite a certain undoubted dissimilarity of human hypostases, their unity is smaller, because we do not find mutual indwelling of human beings in each other, despite one nature, perceived in an analogous way, cf. Joannes Damascenus, *De fide orthodoxa* I, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 54.

of any other truth; for there is nothing which is prior to it. Apophatic thought, renouncing every support, finds its support in God, whose incomprehensibility appears as Trinity. Here thought gains a stability which cannot be shaken; theology finds its foundation; ignorance passes into knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

To sum up the whole of our considerations, it should be stated that the apophatic antinomy of the Trinity as one truth in all the truths of Christianity makes apophatic antinomy extend, more: it is the basic structure of all reality, as well as theological thinking based on the Trinitarian antinomic logic.<sup>58</sup> “It is the Trinity, and this fact can be deduced from no principle nor explained by any sufficient reason, for there are neither principles nor causes anterior to the Trinity,”<sup>59</sup> and the linguistic expression-pointing to the Trinity is possible only with the use of an apophatic unity-antinomic language, hence the apophatically synonymous antinomy of “hypostasis” and “ousia” in their self-transgression immersion in the mystery of the Trinity.<sup>60</sup> Using the language of Pseudo-Dionysius, it should be rather said: in the mystery of

<sup>57</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 63–64.

<sup>58</sup> A great enthusiast of antinomic thinking was Pavel Florensky in the 20th century (see *The Pillar*, 106–123, 411–412), demonstrating, among other things, the inadequacy of logic based on the scholastic principle of identity; *ibidem*, 465–467. “We might ask whether the subsequent controversies did not arise because people partly forgot the properly divine «logic» which is always simultaneously one and threefold, quite surpassing the fallen rationality, the process of which remains binary” (Clément, *The Roots*, 72).

<sup>59</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 47. “The Trinity is therefore not the result of a process, but a primordial given. I has Its principle only in this, not above it: nothing is superior to It” (Lossky, *Orthodox*, 47).

<sup>60</sup> “What will subsist beyond all negating or positing, is the notion of the absolute hypostatic difference and of the equally absolute identity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And in the same time triadological terms and distinctions – nature, essence, person, hypostasis – still will remain inaccurate, despite their mathematical purity (or perhaps because of this purity), expressing above all deficiency of language and failure of the mind before the mystery of the personal God who reveals himself as transcending the every revelation with the created. Every Trinitarian theology which wishes to be disengaged from cosmological implications in order to be able to ascribe some of its notions to the beyond of, to God-in-Himself, ought to have recourse to apophasis” (Lossky, “Apophasis and Trinitarian,” 16–17). An interesting remark is made by Pseudo-Dionysius who, in addition to the “unifying” Divine Names referring to the entire Divinity, which are transcended by way of apophasis, also distinguishes the super-substantial names distinguishing and concretising the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which absolutely must not be exchanged one for the other or combined, cf. *De divinis* III. They, too, must be transcended by way of apophasis, since they are taken from the world of creatures; however, the truth which they both wish somehow to touch, somehow to approximate, somehow to express, can never be transcended, because there is nothing to transcend, and that is the mystery of the Trinity in Its Trinitarian antinomy: “In his treatise *Of the Divine Names*, in examining the name of the One, which can be applied to God, he shows its insufficiency and compares with it another and «most sublime» name – that of Trinity, which teaches us that God is neither one nor many but that He transcends this antinomy, being unknowable in what He is” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 31); see Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis* XIII, 3. Cf. also Joseph Ratzinger’s epistemic-linguistic remarks on trinitology as negative theology, which, among other things, emphasises that all concepts used within the language of Trinitarian theology fulfill their function only through self-crucifixion – a conclusion that is not only dogmatic but also historical, since any concepts used by the Church in expressing the mystery of the Trinity were previously condemned by the Church, see Ratzinger, *Einführung*, 117–118.

the Super-Trinity, not that God is greater than the Trinity, and therefore above It – after all, there is no God beyond the Trinity, but because even the name of the Trinity does not reflect It – the Divine Trinity – trinitarian antinomic mystery.<sup>61</sup> In short: the antinomic nature of the Trinity becomes the hermeneutical key to perceiving the Trinitarian antinomic ontology, epistemology, logic, etc., because the antinomic Trinitarian unity – the Trinitarian antinomic unity is the only law of existence, the unconditional source.<sup>62</sup>

According to a modern Russian theologian, Father Florensky, there is no other way in which human thought may find perfect stability save that of accepting the trinitarian antinomy. If we reject the Trinity as the sole ground of all reality and of all thought, we are committed to a road that leads nowhere; we end in an aporia, in folly, in the disintegration of our being, in spiritual death. Between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice.

<sup>61</sup> The antinomic thinking, according to Lossky, emphasises the primacy of the “apophatic method. [...] The antinomy is a sign that even the ‘positive way’ in theology carries within itself apophaticism as the ultimate truth about knowing God. Thus, it indicates that cataphatic expressions in theology refer beyond themselves, towards a Reality that is ultimately inexpressible and incomprehensible. [...] Lossky talks about the transformation of reason, or even its ‘conversion’, to which the encountered antinomies are supposed to induce. [...] Although Lossky insists that he does not negate the value of theological knowledge, it seems that the role of reflection on the truths of faith may be to bring one to the threshold of what is only authentic theological cognition: the mystical experience, of being filled with incredible light” (Persidok, “W trosce,” 151–153). Lossky should in no way be attributed with an attempt at an apophatic criticism of Revelation or theology – see Woźniak, *Różnica*, 428–436. He emphatically states that “[...] the incomprehensible God reveals Himself as the Holy Trinity, if His incomprehensibility appears as the mystery of the Three Persons and the One Nature [...]” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 239). Thus, “ultimately it is Trinitarianism that is apophatic and apophasis that is Trinitarian” (Płóciennik, “Teopoietyczno-apofatyyczny,” 155, n. 113). The Russian thus appears as a strong defender of a specifically Christian understanding of apophaticism from within the Trinitarian self-revelation of God, which constitutes the *specificum christianorum*.

<sup>62</sup> “If the antinomy of unity and plurality, which is at the heart of the dogma of the Trinity, is the source and central antinomy, then the second antinomy, also concerning God, but this time in relation to creatures, is very close to it. Just as the Trinity in its deepest mystery is the irreducible antinomy of unity and trinity, so in reference *ad extra* it appears in the Eastern theology as the antinomy of incompleteness and distinction between the unattainable *essence* and the communicable *energies*. Both antinomies (unity-diversity and non-complexity-distinction, corresponding to the two distinctions nature-Persons and essence-energies) must necessarily be preserved for soteriological reasons – only they ensure that the truth of man’s divinisation is maintained.” The essence-energy antinomy obviously indicates the neo-Palamite foundation of Lossky’s thought; the co-existence of these antinomies in God, or rather the existence of God in the manner of these co-antinomies, certainly deserves a separate study, while two issues should be emphasised in this context: the logical primacy of the antinomy of unity-diversity and the independence of the antinomy of essence and energies in God from His relations *ad extra* – the Trinity exists in its essence and energies independently of the creation and would have existed so even if the creation had not existed, a fact that Andrzej Persidok missed – see Lossky, *The Mystical*, 74–75; Lossky, *Orthodox*, 32. “Thus the theology of the Eastern Church distinguishes in God the three hypostases, the nature or essence, and the energies. The Son and the Holy Spirit are, so to say, personal processions, the energies natural processions. The energies are inseparable from the nature, and the nature is inseparable from the three Persons” (Lossky, *The Mystical*, 85–86). Thus, ultimately, talking about the primacy of one antinomy over another, if only in a logical sense, would also require clarification.

This question is, indeed, crucial—in the literal sense of that word. The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought. The apophatic ascent is a mounting of calvary. This is the reason why no philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. This is the reason why human spirit was able to receive the full revelation of Godhead only after Christ on the cross has triumphed over death and over the abyss of hell. This, finally, is the reason why the revelation of the Trinity shines out in the Church as a purely religious gift, as the catholic truth above all other.<sup>63</sup>

However, this recognition is possible only in faith, as consent to the absolute mystery, expressed from the position of personal commitment to it in the way of worship: “Thus the Trinity is the initial mystery, the Holy of Holies of the divine reality, the very life of the hidden God, the living God. [...] All existence and all knowledge are posterior to the Trinity and find in It their base. The Trinity cannot be grasped by man. It is rather the Trinity that seizes man and provokes praise in him. Outside of praise and adoration, outside of the personal relationship of faith, our language, when speaking of the Trinity, is always false.”<sup>64</sup>

According to Lossky, the Trinity is therefore an absolutely transcendental assumption and source of being, thinking, speaking, an apophatically antinomic assumption, accessible only contemplatively in His gracious Revelation,<sup>65</sup> which at the same time infinitely transcends in every (created) respect.

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<sup>63</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical*, 65–66. Cf. Florensky, *The Pillar*, 39–52, 106–123, 420–424.

<sup>64</sup> Lossky, *Orthodox*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> “The goal of this antinomic theology is not to forge a systems of concepts, but to serve as a support for the human spirit in the contemplation of the divine mysteries. Every antinomic opposition of two true propositions gives way to a dogma, *i.e.* to a real distinction, although ineffable and unintelligible, which cannot be base on any concepts or deduced by a process of reasoning, since it is the expression of a reality of a religious order. If one is forced to establish this distinctions, it is precisely to safeguard the antinomy, to prevent the human spirit from being led astray, breaking the antinomy and falling then from the contemplation of divine mysteries into the platitude of rationalism, replacing living experience with concepts. The antinomy, on the contrary, raises the spirit from the realm of concepts to the concrete data of Revelation” (Lossky, “The Theology of Light,” 52).

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# The Limits of Rational Knowledge of God According to Joseph Ratzinger

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**Abstract:** Joseph Ratzinger’s theological thought is distinguished by the conviction that the Christian knowledge of God is closely associated with the concept of the *Logos*. Therefore, in his reflection, Joseph Ratzinger is a theologian who seeks to render the mystery of God in positive terms. Yet, it would be a mistake to leave this statement without adding that in the rational knowledge of God, theology should at the same time confront what constitutes the limit of rational knowledge. The aim of this article is therefore to provide an overview of how Joseph Ratzinger pointed to the limits of the rational knowledge of God. A two-step method was adopted to achieve this goal. With reference to the synthetic approach, it first accounts for the place that the question of the rational knowledge of God takes in J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection; then it points out how, according to the German theologian, we should understand the apophatic dimension of all theological knowledge; namely, that God, being the infinite Love, can only be known in aspects, and only in the attitude of surrender. In the next step, the most significant aspects of Joseph Ratzinger’s theological reflection on theological knowledge were selected. The analysis of representative texts demonstrates how the German theologian understands limits in the rational knowledge of God. Thus, the understanding of rationality closed to the knowledge of God was presented first, along with the requirements that reason has to meet in order to open itself to the knowledge of God. Then it was demonstrated which of the most important areas of J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection refer to the limits of rational knowledge, and how they do it. The article concerns the limits of knowledge determined by the Revelation, the mystery of God, and the personal centre of Revelation – Christ, as well as the ecclesiastical nature of the creed.

**Keywords:** Joseph Ratzinger, positive theology, apophatic theology, rationality, knowledge of God

The conviction that the mystery of God is rational lies at the core of Joseph Ratzinger’s entire theological work. This is reflected not only in the breadth of his work, in which he expressed the belief that *ratio* can and should be involved in the reflection on issues related to God. It is also reflected in the fact that he *explicitly* explored the theme of the rational knowledge of God from the beginning of his theological reflection until its end.

This topic was one of the main themes of his lecture delivered on 24 June 1959 on the occasion of his appointment to the Chair of Fundamental Theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Bonn. Joseph Ratzinger titled the lecture “The God of Faith and the God of Philosophers.”<sup>1</sup> The conviction that *ratio* has

<sup>1</sup> The text was subsequently published under the title: “Der Gott des Glaubens und der Gott der Philosophen. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der theologia naturalis” (Ratzinger, “Der Gott des Glaubens,” 40–59) and was later reissued. Polish trans.: Ratzinger, “Bóg wiary i Bóg filozofów,” 149–168.

access to the mystery of God was also expressed in later publications and addresses, such as the *Introduction to Christianity*, where Ratzinger stated: “It is nonsense to plead the ‘mystery,’ as people certainly do only too often, by way of an excuse for the failure of reason. If theology arrives at all kinds of absurdities and tries, not only to excuse them, but even where possible to canonize them by pointing to the mystery, then we are confronted with a misuse of the true idea of ‘mystery,’ the purpose of which is not to destroy reason but rather to render belief possible *as* understanding.”<sup>2</sup>

This thought was expressed in a very meaningful way in a speech delivered at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006, which was addressed to representatives of the academic world. The address was titled “Glaube, Vernunft und Universität. Erinnerungen und Reflexionen [Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections]”. Benedict XVI said then, recalling a conversation between the Christian Emperor Paleologus and a Muslim who claimed that God’s actions are not subject to human logic:

Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God’s nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: “In the beginning was the λόγος.” This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts, σὺν λόγῳ, with *logos*. *Logos* means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God.<sup>3</sup>

According to J. Ratzinger, the close connection between rationality and the mystery of God also means that reason plays a critical role in relation to the assertions of faith. It protects faith from being relegated to the space of subjectivity and privacy, and from ceasing to be communicable.<sup>4</sup>

To appreciate the significance of this reflection, it needs to be reminded that, at the time when the *Introduction to Christianity* was written, J. Ratzinger was one of the few authors who addressed the issue with such attention, and that his reflection on the relationship between the knowledge of God by faith and rational cognition is not only a meta-scientific reflection, but is also distinguished by an exceptionally broad consideration of cultural change and the historical context.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this research topic has not only been relevant to Ratzinger since his first publications but has also been a constant point of reference in the writings he published as pope.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 76–77.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of Science.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, “Die wichtigste kulturelle Herausforderung,” 254.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fisichella, “Verità fede e ragione,” 28.

<sup>6</sup> Blanco Sarto, “Myśl teologiczna,” 38.

## 1. Reason in the Face of Mystery That Surpasses It

Joseph Ratzinger's reflection on the mystery of God is therefore essentially oriented toward knowing it in positive terms and emphasises the ability of the *ratio* to grasp the truth about God. However, this does not mean that his thought fails to consider the fact that the truth about God is always greater than human knowledge and that God remains an unfathomable mystery. Admittedly, it is difficult to find texts extensively treating the issue of apophatic theology in the German theologian's work. However, it is possible to find statements that allow us to grasp his understanding of God's incomprehensibility and the limitations of reason in discovering the Divine mystery.

One of the texts, in which this can be grasped best, is a part of the commentary on the confession of faith in the Triune God in the *Introduction to Christianity*. It is there that J. Ratzinger writes that Christian theology has to realise its limits in the face of the mystery of the Trinity and that "a realm, in which only the humble admission of ignorance can be true knowledge and only wondering attendance before the incomprehensible mystery can be the right confession."<sup>7</sup>

How should this dimension of incomprehensibility be understood? The analysis of this part of the commentary on the *creed* allows us to identify two reasons why, according to J. Ratzinger, all knowledge of God is at the same time accompanied by a certain dimension of His incomprehensibility. Firstly, the decisive reason is the fact that "Love is always '*mysterium*' – more that one can reckon or grasp by subsequent reckoning. Love itself – the uncreated, eternal God – *must* therefore be in the highest degree a mystery – 'the' *mysterium* itself."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in knowing God, man does not come to "possess" something of His mystery, but discovers it in the relationship of love with God. The truth about God is therefore apophatic in the sense that it is discovered in the act of surrender rather than grasping.

The second reason is indicated by Ratzinger's commentary on the development of the Trinitarian dogma. Commenting on the process, he remarks that the dogma itself has its roots not in speculation about God or in a philosophical attempt to explain the origin of being. The dogma originated from a reflection on how God has been known in history. Summing up this observation, J. Ratzinger states:

Every one of the big basic concepts of the doctrine of the Trinity was condemned at one time or another; they were all adopted only inasmuch as they are at the same time branded as unusable and admitted simply as poor stammering utterances – and no more. The concept '*persona*' (or *prosopon*) was once condemned, as we have seen; the crucial word that in the fourth century became the standard of orthodoxy, *homousios* (=of one substance with

<sup>7</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 162.

<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 162.

the Father), had been condemned in the third century; the concept of ‘proceeding’ has a condemnation behind it – and so one could go on. One must say, I think, that this condemnation of the later formulas of faith form an intimate part of them: it is only through the negation, and the infinite indirectness implicit in it, that they are usable. The doctrine of the Trinity is only possible as a piece of baffled theology, so to speak.<sup>9</sup>

Pointing out that all human knowledge and discourse about God is “poor stammering utterances” and involves practicing a “crucified theology” does not mean that Ratzinger is giving up on the claim that truth is not accessible in this knowledge and discourse. It is accessible, albeit only with the reservation that one remembers about the insufficiency of this knowledge and about the fact that this is only the knowledge of aspects. Explaining this fact, the German theologian refers to the example of modern physics, which points out that it is impossible to study the corpuscular and wave structure of matter at the same time. Similarly, therefore, in knowing God, it is not possible to know Him completely and comprehensively but “only by circling round, by looking and describing from different, apparently contrary angles can we succeed in alluding to the truth, which is never visible to us in its totality.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it should be said that, to Ratzinger, the awareness of the incomprehensibility of God does not mean that man should give up on speaking about God in his cognition.<sup>11</sup> The possibility of talking about God follows from the fact that He is not entirely incomprehensible – He can be known but only in aspects and in an act of loving engagement.

Thus, the inability to know God completely does not rule out the activity of *ratio*. The mystery of God remains rational. Nevertheless, emphasising the rational character of faith, which does not imply giving up on reason, even in the face of the limits to our knowledge, the German theologian makes it clear at the same time that this applies to a reason that has not been narrowed.<sup>12</sup> First, we need to briefly outline how J. Ratzinger defines that narrowed model of rationality, so that we can subsequently show how he understands the possibility of rational knowledge to be attained by a reason that is open to this knowledge and where reason may potentially encounter limits in the knowledge of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 172.

<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 174.

<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, “Preaching God Today,” 88.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, “Wege des Glaubens,” 550–551, 640–643.

## 2. Rationality vs. Openness to the Knowledge of God

In his publications, J. Ratzinger identifies two main reasons why the knowledge of God in modern times is perceived as unrelated to rational knowledge. The German theologian sees the first of these reasons in the evolution that took place in philosophy in response to the claims made by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Referring to Kant's thought, the Bavarian theologian does not comment extensively on his philosophical system but instead, he mainly stresses that Kant's critique of metaphysics marked the end of unity in philosophical thinking and of the belief in the truthfulness of the knowledge of God through reason.<sup>13</sup> Behind this claim, of course, is Kant's thesis that arguments for the existence of God and the knowledge of Him are accomplished not on the metaphysical but on the moral level.<sup>14</sup>

Ratzinger believes that Schleiermacher contributed further to the departure from the metaphysical horizon of cognition. Referring to the three different dimensions of human existence, namely, reason, will, and emotion, he linked religion to feeling, science to reason, and ethos to will. As a consequence of this, religion was reduced to something that is quite indescribable and undefinable; it is something that focuses on the subject experiencing emotions rather than an encounter with an objective interlocutor. It is, in a word, beyond rational cognition.<sup>15</sup>

Moving away from a philosophy that has the courage to ask about the truth of reality is therefore, according to Ratzinger, the first reason why rationality closes itself to the knowledge of God. According to Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik, we can propose a thesis that, in his philosophical views, J. Ratzinger is a classical philosopher, in the same sense as the term is understood by the Lublin school of philosophy, which means: convinced about the existence of truth and its cognisability by reason, taking into account the deepest and existential human questions, as well as the significant role of love in cognition. Although the aforementioned author admits that substantiating this hypothesis requires deeper analysis, she points to a number of arguments in favour of it.<sup>16</sup> Krzysztof Kaucha, meanwhile, states that J. Ratzinger develops a philosophy that considers metaphysics and ontology, incorporating the scientific view of the world into his reflection.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the first reason why, according to the German theologian, rational knowledge of God presents itself as impossible is, above all, related to the metaphysical assumptions and the abandonment of the courage to ask questions about the essence of things.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.1–11.3.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Judycki, "Kant," 621.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.4.

<sup>16</sup> Lekka-Kowalik, "Przymierze na rzecz rozumu i prawdy," 37–42.

<sup>17</sup> Kaucha, *Cóż to jest prawda?*, 88.

The second reason is closely correlated with the first, although, in Ratzinger's view, it is not limited to the area of philosophical reflection. It is more a way of thinking that came to prevail in modernity, and that is marked by a kind of positivism. That positivism has, admittedly, marked its influence in philosophy too (here, Ratzinger mentions Kant, but, above all, cites the thought of Wittgenstein), however, its influence on the way of thinking is much broader.<sup>18</sup> This is how J. Ratzinger describes it in one of his texts:

The successes in the progressive discovery of the material world and of its laws are achieved through an ever stricter and more refined application of that method which is characterized by the combination of observation, experiment, and the development of mathematical theories. Within this method, which limits itself to what is verifiable and falsifiable and from that acquires its generally binding certainty, there is no room for the question about the essential causes of things. Since God is not observable along the lines of a repeatable experiment and not calculable in terms of a mathematical theory, he cannot appear within this method—that is by its very nature impossible.<sup>19</sup>

The second reason why reason remains closed to the knowledge of God is related to the prevalence of a mentality founded on the cognition characteristic of natural sciences that does not open itself to a broader cognitive horizon.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the scientific reason does not have to be hostile to matters of faith; rather, it is no longer interested in it, as it has ceased to seek the ultimate and definitive truth of existence.<sup>21</sup>

We have no space here to elaborate on the reasons why J. Ratzinger rejects this understanding of reason. A detailed analysis of Ratzinger's texts from this point of view has been conducted by Krystian Kałuza.<sup>22</sup> What is important for the present analysis is the German theologian's belief that there is a need for a different understanding of rational cognition. Where reason is locked within the limits of objective cognition, knowledge of God remains inaccessible. It is therefore necessary to recognise that *ratio* should perform its activity in accordance with the nature of man and, more specifically, with the dialogical conception of the person. Ratzinger wrote about it in the *Introduction to Christianity*:

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "Faith and Knowledge," 9.12; Ratzinger, "Faith and Philosophy," 11.13.

<sup>19</sup> Ratzinger, "Contemporary Man," 79.

<sup>20</sup> In another place, J. Ratzinger ("Theology and Church Politics," 21.8) states: "For the farther the Enlightenment advanced historically, the more it fell into the habit of narrowing the concept of reason: Reason is what is reproducible. This means that reason becomes positivistic. Thus it restricts itself to what can be demonstrated over and over experimentally; but the consequence of this is that it abandons its own initial question, 'What is it?' and replaces it with the pragmatic question, 'How does it function?' This in turn means that, under the pressure of its standards for certainty, reason abandons the question about the truth and investigates nothing more than feasibility. In doing so, it has fundamentally abdicated as reason."

<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger, "Die wichtigste kulturelle Herausforderung," 254.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kałuza, "Josepha Ratzinger's koncepcja teologii fundamentalnej," 63–77.

For man is the more himself the more he is with ‘the other.’ He only comes *to* himself by moving away *from* himself. [...] Accordingly, he is completely himself when he has ceased to stand in himself, to shut himself off in himself, and to assert himself, when in fact he is pure openness to God. To put it again in different terms: man comes to himself by moving out beyond himself. Jesus Christ is he who has moved right out beyond himself and *thus* the man who has truly come to himself.<sup>23</sup>

The consequence of this assumption is the German theologian’s belief that only reason that is open to receive what is given to it by God can properly know the things of God. According to Andrzej Czaja, this rule comes from the legacy of St. Augustine and has been consistently applied throughout J. Ratzinger’s theological reflection.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, J. Ratzinger himself will emphasise that reason has to be open to this deeper meaning, as logic itself has “a nose of wax,” which means that it is prone to be turned in different directions.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Beginning of Theological Knowledge – A Gift That Comes from “Outside” of the Knowing Subject

The above conclusion leads directly to the first area of Ratzinger’s theological reflection, in which the limits of rationality are clearly drawn. It is the question of Revelation. He devoted a lot of space to this topic in his theological reflection, at various stages of his academic career. The purpose of this study is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of J. Ratzinger’s understanding of the Revelation but to point out how Revelation places certain limits on rational knowledge and how it delineates the “space” for rational reflection.<sup>26</sup>

Above all then, as it flows from the nature of Revelation, new knowledge of God is opened to human reason only through the act of faith. Significantly, in one of his texts, Ratzinger describes faith as a new beginning of thought that man himself cannot establish and cannot replace. It is a new beginning that comes from the Word.<sup>27</sup> He expresses it in yet another way by referring to St. Augustine’s famous saying *credo ut intelligam*. He confessed that this phrase reflects accurately the essence of his understanding of the mystery of God and that he himself, following St. Augustine and

<sup>23</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 234–235.

<sup>24</sup> Czaja, “Naczelna zasada,” 5. To learn more about the role of St. Augustine’s thought in J. Ratzinger’s theology see Cipriani, “Sanct’Agostino,” 9–26.

<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger, “Vorwort,” 786. Cf. Ratzinger, “Die Einheit des Glaubens,” 178–181.

<sup>26</sup> A broader account of the understanding of God’s Revelation in J. Ratzinger’s work is discussed by Rafał Pokrywiński („Pojęcie Objawienia Bożego,” 81–102).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 397.

St. Thomas Aquinas, understands his theology this way, calling the above-mentioned motto the fundamental thesis of faith.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, this does not imply that J. Ratzinger denies the possibility of knowing God by natural means, using only reason that has not been enlightened by faith. As was indicated above, the possibility of rational knowledge of God derives from the fact that creation bears in itself a trace of Him who is the Logos. Nonetheless, referring to the dogma on the natural knowledge of God, J. Ratzinger stressed that, though it cannot be denied, one should also not overestimate this claim. It expresses the unity of creation and redemption; it states that faith in Christ is not a separate area, unrelated to the rest of being, but that it reaches the basis of all things.<sup>29</sup> Behind these claims is the German theologian's conviction that rational knowledge of God solely through reason, within historical reality, frequently encounters obstacles from man himself.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the first limitation that reason has to confront when it wants to know God is the fact that God is most clearly accessible in Revelation. The second limitation is the fact that the attitude of faith, not understanding, has priority in meeting God who reaches out to man. Understanding comes second, as a consequence of faith. Ratzinger emphasises this, pointing out that the primacy of faith is related to the fact that the act of faith is a reliance on You and opens one to realities that are accessible only to a trusting and loving person.<sup>31</sup>

The German theologian expressed this thought in other works too. In the *Introduction to Christianity* he will repeat that the knowledge of God eludes objectivity and that someone who is trying to be a mere spectator will not learn anything.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, in his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, he will recall biblical testimonies reminding us that the knowledge of God is linked to the attitude of humility, as expressed by St. Paul in his famous statement on the foolishness of the cross and Divine wisdom that is not accessible to the wise of this world (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–19, 26–29; 3:18) and on the fact that giving up on human wisdom consists in the readiness to enter into the knowledge of God that is characteristic of the Son. Ratzinger states: “We might also say that our will has to become a filial will. When it does, then we can see. But to be a son is to be in relation: it is a relational concept. It involves giving up the autonomy that is closed in upon itself; it includes what Jesus means by saying that we have to become like children.”<sup>33</sup>

An observation that Ratzinger makes in his study of the concept of Revelation in St. Bonaventure is interesting in this context. He notices a certain difference in the

28 Cf. Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt of the Earth*, 7.114–7.116.

29 Ratzinger, “Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild,” 52.

30 Cf. Ratzinger, “Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild,” 52.

31 Ratzinger, “Faith and Knowledge,” 9.14.

32 Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 175.

33 Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 283.



understanding of theological reflection by St. Thomas and by St. Bonaventure. While to the former, theology means the building of new conclusions that follow from the articles of faith (cf. S. Th. q. 1, Art. 2 and 7), in Bonaventure's view, theology does not supply new content but merely re-states it in a language that can be understood. Therefore, in the latter case, it is not so much a matter of extensive movement that broadens the conclusions, but of going deeper, as the task of theology is not to create new ideas but to find the right words for ideas that do not come from it, but from God Himself. Its task would therefore be to receive the Kerygma, understand it, and express it in a scientific conceptual language.<sup>34</sup>

To sum up, it can thus be said that in the knowledge of God, the human *ratio* encounters its limits not only in the moment in which it has to open itself to Revelation. Reason is called to be humble, and therefore to defend itself against pride in which it wants to achieve independence and self-reliance in the knowledge of God. The limit here is defined not so much by sources inaccessible outside of the Revelation but by how one functions in obedience to the Word. Traditional theology would articulate it by emphasising that theology cannot be practiced without a living relationship with God.

#### 4. The Centre and Order of Theological Thinking

The aforementioned claim of the German theologian that reason has to not only recognise its cognitive limits and open itself to Revelation but also act in an attitude of humility and obedience, demands to be elaborated. It gives rise to the question of how this attitude of humility and obedience is reflected in theological thinking and how one can speak of the limits of theological knowledge in this context. It seems that, in the case of Ratzinger's theology, it is the most appropriate to speak not so much about strict boundaries but about the fact that theological knowledge has to be properly oriented and have a proper central point of reference.

According to Ratzinger, a living experience of God stands at the centre of theological reflection. The German theologian strongly emphasises that authentic knowledge of God is based not so much on reflection as on experience, and that reflection is secondary to it – it is secondary, as God allows Himself to be known in the encounter, that is, in the experience of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

An important addition is required here. To Ratzinger, the claim that God can be known fully through Jesus Christ means also that knowledge has the nature of

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<sup>34</sup> Ratzinger, "Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie," 204–205.

<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, "Gottesbegriff und Gottesbild," 49.

a way and should be described as imitation.<sup>36</sup> This is why Jerzy Szymik states, citing what Benedict XVI wrote in his book about Jesus of Nazareth, that the essence of the theological method is *sequela Christi* – conversion, transformation, and imitation of Christ.<sup>37</sup> It is a strictly Augustinian-Bonaventurian belief, which means that all faculties of the soul; memory, intellect, and will, need to interact in attaining the knowledge of God.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, to J. Ratzinger, theology is a deep harmony of two subjects: God who speaks, and man who allows Him to express Himself in the human word.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, with all his acceptance of the scientific character of theological reflection, Ratzinger emphasises that theology can be studied only in the context of appropriate spiritual practice, and with readiness to accept its claims on life. “But just as we cannot learn to swim without water, so we cannot learn theology without the spiritual praxis in which it lives.”<sup>40</sup> It is also from this perspective that we need to understand the words in which Ratzinger stressed that his interest in issues related to the liturgy was closely linked to the question of faith and theology. He wrote:

I chose fundamental theology as my field because I wanted first and foremost to examine thoroughly the question: Why do we believe? But also included from the beginning in this question was the other question of the right response to God and, thus, the question of the liturgy. My studies on the liturgy are to be understood from this perspective. I was concerned, not about the specific problems of liturgical studies, but always about anchoring the liturgy in the foundational act of our faith and, thus, also about its place in the whole of our human existence.<sup>41</sup>

Radical obedience to what God had said is, to Ratzinger, a logical consequence of this understanding of theology. Scott Hahn was right to point out in this context that, with regard to the German scholar’s theology, one can draw the conclusion that there has been no other Catholic theologian in the last century, or perhaps ever, who would practice theology so deeply integrated with the Bible and based on biblical categories.<sup>42</sup> One can therefore say that, for Ratzinger, reason has to be obedient to the word of the Scripture and to the ideas that grow out of it. Knowledge of God is not the fruit of reason, which, admittedly, begins with knowing God’s realities, but then thinks about it on its own. It is a never-ending dialogue. Ratzinger emphasises it strongly, commenting on the issue of modern-day preaching; he says that, in speaking about

<sup>36</sup> Ratzinger, “Contemporary Man,” 87.

<sup>37</sup> Szymik, *Theologia Benedicta*, 66–67.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Szymik, *Prawda i mądrość*, 34–35.

<sup>40</sup> Ratzinger, “What Is Theology?,” 322.

<sup>41</sup> Ratzinger, “On the Inaugural Volume,” 10.2.

<sup>42</sup> Hahn, *Covenant and Communion*, 14.

God, it is necessary to refer to the Biblical image of God.<sup>43</sup> If so, then, according to Ratzinger, rational knowledge of God finds its ultimate measure in what God has said about Himself. This way, *ratio*, enlightened by faith, imposes some limits on itself and points to the direction of thinking.

Listening to the Word and confronting it is therefore what sets the direction for the reflection that reason undertakes when it reaches for its own knowledge. This conclusion echoes Ratzinger's reply to the question about the specific character of his theology. The German theologian replied then that he has never attempted to develop his own system but instead, he followed the faith of the Church, which also meant its great thinkers, and that his starting point in this was the Word.<sup>44</sup>

Another important issue describing how J. Ratzinger understood the need to shape theological thinking is something that can be described as its ecclesiastical character that emerges from the nature of theology. However, for the later prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith this does not signify some kind of "violence" in which the autonomous *ratio* has to submit to something foreign to it and what is imposed on it as if from outside. Ratzinger states: "If, then, the coordination of Church and theology is described as medieval, that fact should raise the basic question of whether it is not precisely here that enlightened reason finds its limits."<sup>45</sup>

In his argumentation justifying the claim that theology must have an ecclesiastic character by its very nature, the German theologian points to two reasons. The first one is that any human grasp of truth through a theological reflection is, by nature, limited. He remarks, therefore, that the fullness of truth is present only in the Risen Lord and that it was not given in an absolute way at any point in history. It is communicated to us in the entirety of history, maintaining an openness to the future, in which the Spirit leads to a deeper understanding of the truth (cf. John 16:12–13). From this follows the second reason – the subject of the understanding of faith is not an individual person but the Church, which retains the understanding of faith by all ages. Ratzinger states that the basic form of orthodoxy consists in believing with the whole Church and accepting the entire history of that faith. A Christian who believes as a member of the Church, which is a timeless entity, therefore relativises his "today," and his faith has to be experienced in obedience to what has already been given to the Church, while he has to be open to be led by the Spirit that works within the Church.<sup>46</sup>

Behind these words also stand the conviction that the knowledge of faith taking place in the Church has a sacramental structure, as it demands – according to Paul's

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "Preaching God Today," 99–101.

<sup>44</sup> Ratzinger – Seewald, *Salt of the Earth*, 10.28–10.30.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "The Church and Scientific Theology," 324.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, "Die Einheit des Glaubens," 183.

statement “I no longer live” (cf. Gal 2:20) – the substitution of one’s own self with Christ, who gives himself in the Church as the “Body of Christ.”<sup>47</sup> The Church is what “being contemporary with Christ”<sup>48</sup> means to a Christian.

## Conclusions

An encounter with Joseph Ratzinger’s theological thought allows us to see that he is deeply convinced that it is possible to know God rationally. This does not mean, however, that the German theologian does not see that human knowledge is limited in the face of the mystery of God. The apophatic dimension of theological knowledge is first related to the fact that, ultimately, the object of that knowledge is God as infinite Love, and the knowledge of love, by its very nature, requires an attitude of surrender rather than the will to possess. Therefore, God remains incomprehensible to human reason and can only be known if one turns to Him with humility. Secondly, the elusiveness of the mystery of God is also the result of the nature of human cognition, which is always limited to aspects in relation to the incomprehensible fullness of God. Thus, in Ratzinger’s thought, a certain limitation is inherent in the very nature of the human cognitive act. The limit is the way in which God can be known and how the human *ratio* is capable of attaining this knowledge.

However, Ratzinger’s reflection on the rational knowledge of God is dominated not so much by a theoretical analysis of the apophatic dimension of that knowledge, as by the attempt to answer the question of how one can truly know God and where certain limits in this knowledge are.

The analysis conducted in this article has led to the following conclusions. Firstly, in his theological works, Joseph Ratzinger points out that the conviction about the possibility of rational knowledge of God meets with criticism nowadays for two reasons. First of all, it is related to the heritage of modern philosophical reflection. It moved away from grand metaphysics and from asking questions about truth and the purpose of life; moreover, under the influence of Kant and Schleiermacher, it concluded that matters related to religion evade objective knowledge and are accessible only in a subjective experience. The second reason, meanwhile, has the character of a general belief that dominates modern thinking. Things are considered rational if they can be verified along the lines of natural sciences.

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<sup>47</sup> Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 393–394. For more see Szymik, *Theologia benedicta*, 77–93 (Szymik titled this part of the commentary to J. Ratzinger’s theology “Proces ‘podmiany podmiotu’ a kościelność teologii” [The Process of ‘Substitution of the Subject’ and the Ecclesiastical Character of Theology]).

<sup>48</sup> Ratzinger, “The Church as an Essential Dimension of Theology,” 399.

Thus, the first limit in the rational knowledge of God is, according to Joseph Ratzinger, linked to the narrow understanding of rationality. It is therefore a limit related to the very understanding of rationality. Only a *ratio* that is prepared to search for the deepest truth and purpose of reality and man can open itself to the mystery of God.

The second limitation of human reason in attaining knowledge of the mystery of God consists in the fact that this knowledge cannot be the fruit of an autonomous quest but must result from an encounter with what is given “from outside.” Reason has to open itself to Revelation, in which God reveals Himself to man. It can therefore be suggested that, according to Joseph Ratzinger, Revelation delineates some kind of “space” within which *ratio* can truly know God. Ratzinger does not undermine the possibility of natural knowledge of God but points to the actual fallibility of this knowledge and to its limited character. He understands Revelation as a limit that determines the certainty of the knowledge of God.

The third type of “limit” in the rational knowledge of God in the German theologian’s thought can be described as a kind of “order of theological thinking” or “obedience to a specific method.” At the centre of the rational knowledge of God one has to place the knowledge of Christ, in whom God ultimately revealed Himself. This knowledge, in turn, not only requires engaging the *ratio* but also is closely linked to the imitation of Christ and a personal dialogue with Him that introduces a person to a living bond with God. This is why spiritual practice and liturgy are irreplaceable. This is also where the need for obedience to the Word contained in the Holy Scripture finds its justification. Finally, the order of theological thinking also means that it feeds on the doctrine of the Church, recognising it as the expression of what embodied the mystery of Christ in history.

Of course, the analysis of Joseph Ratzinger’s thought outlined above is a synthesis, and each of the topics raised in it could be elaborated in more detail and would lead to the discovery of further, more specific, questions related to the knowledge of the mystery of God.

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# Does God Think the Same Way We Do? On the Logical Apophatism of Michał Heller

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**Abstract:** Apophatic theology is an approach in theology that emphasizes the limitation of human language and concepts in describing the nature of the Divine. Rooted in ancient religious traditions, apophatic theology has gained attention in contemporary discourse for its potential convergence with the scientific method. This paper expands on a novel application of this approach in which the formal methods of science such as logic and mathematics are engaged to inquire into how God thinks and to what degree the modes of human reasoning can be projected on the nature of the Divine mind. This application has been proposed by Michał Heller and is referred to as the *logical apophatism*. In the course of the analysis carried out in this paper more in-depth understanding of the logical apophatism has been obtained by contrasting it with classical approaches to negative theology such as the *Triplex Via* and supplementing with recent advances within the cognitive sciences. It is concluded that Heller's use of the apophatic approach is manifestly non-standard and its novelty consists in the shift of emphasis from the negative character of the language of theology to the logic of the Divine mind and the logic that underpins the workings of the Universe.

**Keywords:** apophatism, anthropomorphism, cognitive science, logic, category theory, theology

Even those who do not affirm the existence of transcendent realities oftentimes appreciate what is metaphorically called *the mind of God*.<sup>1</sup> While we as humans are very much accustomed to the way we think and the way we perceive reality, mightier powers of reasoning than ours are highly valued. In a broad sense, this can be taken as a manifestation of an apophatic approach already in which some of the purely human modes of reasoning are deemed insufficient in accessing the Divine thought. Interestingly enough, a distinct character of the rules of logic appears on the quantum level where generalized quantum logic applies suggesting that otherness of the Divine Mind makes itself known already in the realm of the created order. Michał Heller's fundamental thesis in his apophatic approach to theology states that "in the Judeo-Christian tradition God is the source of the Highest Rationality but this source does not have to be subjected to what we think is or is not rational."<sup>2</sup> This is what Heller calls the principle of the *logical apophatism*.

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Coles, *Hawking and the Mind of God*.

<sup>2</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszeczeńświat*, 52.

The main goal of this study is twofold: (1) to analyze Heller's argumentation in favor of this principle and (2) to demonstrate the non-standard and novel character of Heller's use of the apophatic method. This novelty results from a clear shift of emphasis in this method from the description of the Divine reality by negation to more positive statements on the nature of the Divine mind and the logic inherent in the structure of the Universe. The pursuit of the goal will consist of four steps. Firstly, Heller's discussion of the classical Aristotelian logic will be reviewed with particular emphasis on how this logic ties with ontology thereby giving rise to the *non-contradiction principle*. Secondly, the specificity of paraconsistent logics will be surveyed in order to show the roots of Heller's principle of logical apophatism. Thirdly, a short and informal account of the category theory will be offered in order to sketch the theoretical environment in which the relations between the different kinds of logic find their clear expression. Fourthly, a detailed conceptual analysis of the logical apophatism will be performed by contrasting it with one of the best known classical approaches to negative theology known as the *Triplex Via*. This contrast will reveal the new content that Heller's logical apophatism brings into the apophatic method in theology. On a more general level, this study contributes to the application of formal methods in theology. Such efforts date back to the Middle Ages to the works of Peter Damian and Nicholas of Cusa who fully approved of contradictions (antinomies) in this discourse. The applications of formal methods in the area of the negative theology continue until the present day.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Aristotle and Non-contradiction

Although Heller introduces the concept of the *logical apophatism* in theology in one of his newer theological works entitled *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat* (More Important than the Universe),<sup>4</sup> his predilection for apophatic thinking permeates many of his earlier works especially when the concept of mystery enters his discourse.<sup>5</sup> The explicit statement of apophatism is made by Heller in the context of his philosophical inquiry as he takes up the issue of the different logical systems integrated into a coherent whole by one of the most abstract contemporary mathematical theory: the *category theory*. Although brief, the statement quite clearly reveals Heller's unique attitude towards apophatism as indicated above:

<sup>3</sup> Meixner, "Negative Theology," 75–89; Brożek – Olszewski – Hohol, *Logic in Theology*; Urbańczyk, "The Logical Challenge," 149–174; Beall, *The Contradictory Christ*.

<sup>4</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 27–54. The English version of the chapter of this book on the logic of God has been published as: Heller, "The Logic of God," 227–244.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Heller, *Usprawiedliwienie Wszechświata*, 91–93.

We said that the logic of our reasoning is classical. However, does this concern all possible domains? If some regions of the world (as the example of quantum mechanics teaches) are governed by logic different than classical, should it not be taken into consideration that some fundamental areas of philosophy (let us think about metaphysics or about the fundamental problems of ontology) at least in some of its aspects, reach beyond the possibilities of classical logic? Isn't it naive to maintain that our capabilities of making inferences retain their validity in areas cognitively distant from our experiences? ... In other words, one needs to take into account that in regards to some issues a certain kind of philosophical apophatism would be appropriate. Apophatism, but not resignation from knowledge. Philosophy has a chance of learning something from theology here. Since the beginning the theologians knew that they are helpless in respect to the "logic of God" but they never ceased to ponder what "reaches beyond."<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly enough, Heller places theologians as an example to follow for philosophers but, as it will shortly turn out, it is him who throws a challenge to theologians by proposing a considerable modification to the classical understanding of the apophatic method. Much of the preparatory work for this purpose, however, is accomplished in one of his chief earlier theological works bearing the title *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata* (The Sense of Life and the Sense of the Universe). Motivated by the medieval disputes on the relations between faith and reason, Heller engages into an inquiry in which he attempts to address general conditions under which the human mind can tolerate contradictory beliefs.<sup>7</sup> This task fits very well within his general philosophical pursuit of exploring the limits of rationality exemplified here by the question whether accepting contradictions implies a breach with rationality or there are richer models of rationality that can accommodate contradictions as natural.

In order to show that the second option is the way to go, Heller carries out the analysis of one of the key principles of the classical philosophy, *the principle of non-contradiction* (equivalently called the *principle of contradiction*). Since this principle has its roots in the works of Aristotle, Heller turns to a very detailed account of the Aristotelian thought in this regard presented by famous Polish philosopher and logician, Jan Łukasiewicz (1878–1956). Łukasiewicz singles out three formulations of the principle of non-contradiction given by Aristotle: *ontological*, *logical* and *psychological*. In the ontological formulation it is asserted that "no object can both have and not have the same attribute" and in the logical: "two propositions, one of which attributes to an object precisely the quality which the other denies it, cannot be true at the same time."<sup>8</sup> The psychological bears no significance for this study and will not

<sup>6</sup> Heller, "Teoria kategorii, logika i filozofia," 5–15. A preliminary survey of Heller's philosophical apophatism has been presented in: Grygiel, "Apofatyzm filozoficzny," 227–245.

<sup>7</sup> Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 96–99.

<sup>8</sup> Łukasiewicz, *O zasadzie sprzeczności*, 149.

be discussed. Following Łukasiewicz's observation that "true judgments, affirmative and negative, correspond to objective facts, that is, to the relations of having and not having a property by an object."<sup>9</sup> Heller concludes that despite of their different contents, the first two formulations are equivalent because one can be always inferred from the other.<sup>10</sup>

In order to substantiate Heller's opinion that "there exists a cult of the principle of non-contradiction in our culture,"<sup>11</sup> it is worthwhile to reach out to an almost contemporary text in metaphysics written from a very classical point of view to which most of the pre-Vatican II ecclesiastical centers of higher education subscribed. In his commentary on this principle, the author of the text, John P. Noonan, asserts:

The principle of contradiction applies to all being, the material and the spiritual. It is the foundation of all being and of all knowledge, self-evident and not requiring proof. In fact, this principle is incapable of proof because it is immediately evident to the mind. It is the foundation of our rejection of the position of the skeptics. If the principle of contradiction were not admitted, it would be impossible to advance one step on the road to knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

A quick glance at this quote reveals that two important points in Noonan's insistence on the fundamental character of the principle of non-contradiction. First of all, he claims the self-evident character of this principle suggesting that it has to be accepted uncritically and does not require a proof. Every science that studies reality must presuppose this principle because its violation would mean an exclusion from existence. Heller calls such a situation the *ontological overflow*.<sup>13</sup> From the purely formal point of view of classical logic, accepting two contradictory statements falls under the regime of the Duns Scotus' law that from contradiction anything follows (*ex contradictione quodlibet*) thereby rendering a given set of beliefs irrational. The indispensability of the principle of non-contradiction manifests itself also in the thought of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz for whom the principle of contradiction was an *a priori* truth that can be reduced to identity. Heller indicates that the philosophers and theologians of the in the medieval period as well as Leibniz' successors maintained that in His deductions God uses the two-valued logic which was the only logic at their disposal. Also, Heller points out that for Leibniz this logic acquires a transcendent character for God himself is equated with logic.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Łukasiewicz, *O zasadzie sprzeczności*, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Noonan, *General Metaphysics*, 54–55.

<sup>13</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 31–32.

Noonan's forceful explanation evidently does not take into account that what appears as self-evident might in fact be an arbitrary assumption as it is the case in the formulation of an axiomatic system. The seemingly self-evident relation of logical necessity between concepts and reality has been challenged by the development of the contemporary science. The outcome of this challenge is best visible in the onset of the hypothetico-deductive method of science in light of which abstract mathematical formalisms of physical theories must withstand the scrutiny of experiment in order to acquire their proper physical meaning. In other words, their correspondence with reality is not given *a priori* but is established in the process of arduous empirical testing. This, in turn, challenges Noonan's second claim that the principle of non-contradiction is "indispensable on the road to knowledge" because treating it in an aprioric manner may effectively obstruct insight into the nature of reality. Of course, one can accept the principle of non-contradiction as a working assumption which, like every other hypothesis, needs to be subjected to the procedure of verification and may be rejected.

## 2. From Contradiction to Paraconsistency

A relaxed attitude towards the principle of non-contradiction is also endorsed by Łukasiewicz because, in his view, this principle cannot be proven and it is valid only as an assumption.<sup>15</sup> Heller supplements this view by indicating that the *Gödel incompleteness* theorems reinforce the non-provability of this principle.<sup>16</sup> In a more general scheme, the logical indispensability of the principle of non-contradiction begun to lose its force with the development of formal logic beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in particular, with the shift of how logic is understood: it is not an abstraction from reality but it is a set of axioms equipped with the appropriate inferential rules. In order to acquire a better grasp on the nature of this shift, it is worthwhile to pause at a somewhat similar but more illustrative example of the development in geometry. After all, logic has always been central to geometry as a key tool in proving the geometrical theorems.

Prior to the discovery of the non-Euclidean geometries and the formulation of the Erlangen program by German mathematician Felix Klein, the Euclidean geometry was understood ontologically as the only possible geometry of the Universe much the same way the principle of non-contradiction seemed to underpin the physical reality as a whole. As a result of the program, geometries began to be understood as theories of the invariants of the groups of transformations defined strictly by

<sup>15</sup> Łukasiewicz, *O zasadzie sprzeczności*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, *Sens życia sens Wszechświata*, 92–94.

the axioms.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the discovery of the non-Euclidean geometries revealed that the fifth postulate of Euclid is an arbitrary assumption and not a self-evident truth pertaining to the structure of the physical reality. Albert Einstein maintained expressly that geometry is an empirical science and this claim played a key role in the formulation of the theory of relativity, both special and general.<sup>18</sup>

The anthropomorphic origin of the principle of non-contradiction receives additional support by considering the evolutionary and developmental emergence of man's cognitive capacities. It points to the existence of a very specific type of an *intuitive ontology* called in the cognitive science the *folk ontology*.<sup>19</sup> This ontology is a set of cognitive biases or, in other words, non-reflective beliefs on the structure and behavior of reality at the level where the human species evolved. A more careful look at the components of the folk ontology reveals that the ontologically interpreted principle of non-contradiction corresponds very well with the category of *physicality* which is a basic mental tool for conceptualizing objects. This category entails that "solid objects do not do nor readily pass directly through each other or occupy the same place at the same time as each other."<sup>20</sup> Violation of this category would lead into a situation that is physically impossible and cannot become reality thereby implying a logical contradiction. In effect, the non-contradiction principle bears markedly anthropomorphic character that appears on both ontological and epistemological level. On the former it reflects the structure of reality that constitutes the habitat of the human species and, on the latter, it offers mental tools that correspond to this structure. Most importantly, however, the adaptive and developmental mechanisms are responsible for this correspondence not being a result of a mere chance. By invoking the famous *Boyd-Putnam no miracle argument* central to the claims of the *scientific realism* in the philosophy of science,<sup>21</sup> one can expect that without the adaptively and developmentally acquired folk ontology approximating the reality's structure at the level which human species inhabits, its survival would be a miracle.

In the strict sense the loss of the logical validity of the principle of non-contradiction constitutes for Heller the point of departure for the formulation of the logical apophatism. His path to this idea reaches back to the medieval period and, in particular, to the double truth theory which emerged in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the thought of the Latin Averroists such as Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia.<sup>22</sup> Heller indicates that this situation may occur in the development of science where two theories, that contradict themselves, coexist until proven otherwise.<sup>23</sup> Although in the classical

17 E.g., Birkhoff – Bennett, "Felix Klein," 145–176.

18 Einstein, "Geometria i doświadczenie," 84.

19 Barrett, *Cognitive Science*, 62.

20 Barrett, *Cognitive Science*, 62.

21 E.g., Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, 213, 216, 244–252.

22 Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 86–89.

23 Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 98.

idealized thinking such situation is hardly tolerable, there are formal tools which may alleviate the problem thereby showing rational ways how to handle contradictions. This is the major task of the *paraconsistent logics* which are designed for this very purpose.

As Heller relates, the systems of paraconsistent logic were pioneered by Nikolay Vasiliew but the first rigorous system of such logic was proposed by a member of the Lvov-Warsaw School of Logic, Stanisław Jaśkowski. He proposed a logical system named the *discursive logic* in which he achieved a unique effect of quenching the *overflow* of the system when from two contradictory statements anything follows. Consequently, logical systems that tolerate contradictions and do not lead to the overflow (explosion) bear the name of the *paraconsistent logics*. Contradictory statements should be referred to as inconsistent. Heller considers the existence of the paraconsistent logics as a sure sign that the classical logic equipped with the law of Duns Scotus does not exhaust the notion of rationality and that contradictions do not have to imply rationality. More importantly, however, this allows him to conclude that the Divine logic is not the logic in which “anything goes” and that the Divine mind does not tolerate overflows.<sup>24</sup> In order to support his claims, he refers to the works of Polish philosopher and cognitive scientist Robert Poczobut who writes as follows: “Thanks to the resignation from the law of non-contradiction it turned out that the human mind can function in a manner significantly departing from the classical standards of rationality. The emergence of such systems as [paraconsistent logic] does not mean that our mind should produce contradictions. The key point is that their appearance should not lead to destruction.”<sup>25</sup>

### 3. In the Realm of Categories

Inasmuch as the paraconsistent logics appear as a valuable point of departure in the study of the nature of the Divine rationality, Heller takes up a quest for a very general formal framework in which the relations between the different logical systems could find their proper expression. He has identified such a framework in his search for the most fundamental ontology consistent with the contemporary physical theories. This framework bears the name of the *category theory* and constitutes a highly abstract mathematical formalism regarded presently as the most accurate expression of the understanding of a structure and a candidate for the foundation of all mathematics due to its great unifying power. Any rigorous presentation of this

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<sup>24</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Poczobut, *Spór o zasadę niesprzeczności*, 361.

theory reaches out beyond the scope of this study. Its brief conceptual outline will supply the necessary intuitions.<sup>26</sup>

In most general terms a *category* is a collection of objects connected with arrows called *morphisms* which need to obey a set of formal conditions thereby forming an algebra. And now comes the most important point for this study: this algebra carries information on the type of logic that governs a particular category. For instance, if the arrows of a given category obey the rules of the Boolean algebra, then the category has the classical logic as its proper. As one might rightly expect, there exists a category that is governed by the paraconsistent logic and it bears the name of *co-topos*. Heller sums it up as follows: “Each category is a world of its own, a world with internal logic and geometry which admit of different ontological interpretations. One can also speak of the family of all categories (‘the category of all categories’) and of its proper logic, strictly interacting with the internal logics of all categories.”<sup>27</sup>

Heller’s wish in resorting to the highly abstract category theory is that it may serve as a formal tool to approximate the *universal logic* which, in some sense, could be equated with the logic of the Divine mind. He indicates clearly, however, that the current studies on the category theory do not yet directly confirm the existence of the universal logic but they make such development possible and for the time being some form of logical pluralism needs to be maintained. One conclusion stands firm, though: “to assume in this conceptual context that the classical logic is the universal one looks at least as a suspicious doctrine.”<sup>28</sup>

There is no doubt that the purely formal considerations of logical systems located within the general framework of the category theory reveal that rationality is not limited to its human modes. Inferences on the Divine rationality drawn on that basis will considerably gain its strength, however, when references to the structure of the created order are made. Heller pursues this line of argumentation by showing that quantum mechanics may be considered as a single category called *topos* which is governed by its proper logic. This logic is a generalization of the classical two-valued logic and introduces a third logical value: *meaninglessness*.<sup>29</sup> This value is reflected in the Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle which stipulates that the simultaneous measurement of the values of the so called incompatible physical quantities (e.g., position and momentum) with infinite accuracy is impossible. This, in turn, justifies Heller’s fascination with the idea of logic as a *physical variable* in light of which the two-valued classical Aristotelian logic reflects the logical structure of reality proper to its region in which the human species has its habitat. Evidently, nature does not have

<sup>26</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 35–40.

<sup>27</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 39–40.

<sup>28</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Griffiths, *Consistent Quantum Theory*, 60–64.



to operate according to the rules that reflect our thinking and richer logical systems may underpin its noumenal structure.

#### 4. In Light of the *Triplex Via*

The apophatic (negative) theology is a broad concept and it admits a variety of meanings that developed over its long history reaching back to the writings of the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup> The general framework of the negative theology in the Christian tradition rests largely on the doctrine of the *Triplex Via* that has its origins in the *De Divinis Nominibus* of Pseudo-Dionisius. One of the most renowned instances of the application of this doctrine is the negative theology of St. Thomas Aquinas developed in connection with his attempt to introduce the existential component into the Aristotelian essentialism.<sup>31</sup> In most general terms unrelated to any type of metaphysical assumptions, The *Triplex Via* involves three steps by which the human mind ascends to the knowledge of God.<sup>32</sup>

First comes the *Via Causalitatis* which affirms that any discourse on the Divine nature is possible because the concepts used for this purpose have their origin in the world created by God. For instance, God is good because things created by Him are good. The following excerpt from Heller's main work on the logical apophatism reveals that the *Via Causalitatis* clearly enters into his understanding of this mode of theological discourse. He writes: "When we speak about the Divine logic, we can understand this logic in two ways: as logic of our reasoning about God or as logic which God (possibly) uses in his own reasoning. It is a rather obvious thing – at least for the believers – that we can infer something on the logic in the second meaning based on how logic functions in the world created by Him."<sup>33</sup>

While this excerpt will turn out useful in the discussion of the two next steps of the *Triplex Via* as well, Heller expressly admits here that it is because the world created by God its underpinning logic constitutes the point of departure to know what logic may characterize the Divine mind. Also, Heller observes acutely that since God spoke to man through Revelation, the human natural language and the classical logic it obeys has the capacity of revealing something about God.

The next step, the *Via Negationis*, concerns the radical disproportion between the finite character of concepts as the means of cognition and the infinity of God as the object of cognition. As a result, one can only know certain truths about

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Hochstaffl, "Negative Theologie," 725–726; Napiórkowski, *Jak uprawiać teologię?*, 46–47.

<sup>31</sup> Wilhelmsen, *Being and Knowing*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> A concise introduction to the *Triplex Via* can be found in: O'Rourke, "The *Triplex Via* of Naming God," 519–554.

<sup>33</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 33.

the Divine nature and not its entirety. For instance, if one considers the Divine goodness based on the experience of good things in the world, God is good not in the manner the world manifests its goodness, but radically other. In other words, an apophatic thinking enters in when an element proper to human conceptual equipment is denied in order to unveil what pertains to the Divine reality. As Frederick D. Wilhelmsen points out, the *Via Negationis* constitutes the moment of *agnosticism* in theology which serves to guard the theological discourse against the danger of anthropomorphism.<sup>34</sup> The effect of the *Via Negationis* in Heller's logical apophatism is clearly transparent in the explicit denial of the principle of non-contradiction as one moves away from the classical logic proper to the human natural reasoning to the realm of abstract logical systems admitting of deeper dimensions of rationality. Although this example stands at the center of Heller's argumentation, numerous other instances of the need to abandon the human modes of reasoning and conceptualization in science can be given. The transition from the classical to the quantum regime results in the invalidation of one of the key components of the folk ontology, namely that of *locality*, in favor of *non-locality*. Much the same way taking into account the relativistic effects challenges the common sense related concepts of space and time and replaces them with the abstract Minkowski four dimensional space-time. This process has been captured by Hermann Minkowski in the following assertion: "From now onwards space by itself and time by itself will recede completely to become mere shadows and only a type of union of the two will still stand independently on its own."<sup>35</sup>

It is surprising that in the context of the logical apophatism Heller does not bring in what he elsewhere calls the *Kant effect*.<sup>36</sup> He has coined this concept out in the course of an in-depth treatment of one of his favorite topics in philosophy, namely, that of *rationality*. In particular, he takes up the issue of the relation of the rationality of the Universe and the rationality of the human mind. By invoking the evolutionary scenarios of the origin of the human mentality, Heller claims that although the human mind is part of the Universe and the its rationality is part of the rationality of the Universe, the emergence of consciousness and the ensuing richness and autonomy of the human rationality resulted in this rationality being different from the rationality of the Universe. Unfortunately, Heller does not provide any further justification of this standpoint which remains in need of further substantiation by reference to the pertaining cognitive studies. Heller admits that this is a weaker claim than Kant's *a priori* categories but, in his opinion, the autonomy of the human rationality lies at the root of the scientific method. In doing science the human mind

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<sup>34</sup> Wilhelmsen, *Being and Knowing*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Minkowski, *Space and Time*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Heller, "Czy świat jest racjonalny?," 45–47.

creates mental representations of reality which, as science develops, are progressively purified of the mental artefacts to produce more faithful pictures of reality.

Interestingly enough, Heller uses the Kant effect to support his famous distinction between mathematics “with the capital *M*” and “mathematics with the small *m*.”<sup>37</sup> The purpose of this distinction is to justify the Platonic position in the philosophy of mathematics in light of which in formulating mathematics that is found in textbooks the human mind creates representations of the objectively existing world of mathematical structures littered with artifacts of the human thought which cause the Kant effect. The journey towards objectivity involves the successive elimination of these effects. Also, there are studies which demonstrate that symmetry interpreted as a change of perspective becomes a valuable tool towards objectivity which discriminates between what is subjective and changes, and what is objective and remains permanent.<sup>38</sup> Apophatism thus conceived correlates very closely with the cognitive function of metaphors which in accessing the unknown assert both “the like” (objective) and “the unlike” (subjective), resulting in an irremovable tension between what is and what is not.<sup>39</sup>

The classical concern that arises with the application of the *Via Negationis* is that pushing it too far may lead to the denial of any epistemic access to the Divine reality thereby relegating theology into the domain of mythology. So the third step, the *Via Super-Eminentiae* or *Via Transcendentiae* is meant as a rescue from this pitfall.<sup>40</sup> This *Via* stipulates that the attributes of the Divine nature such as goodness, beauty, perfection and many others must infinitely transcend anything that can be acquired on these attributes through the knowledge of creation. In other words, through negation, the Divine attributes are purged of every finite connotation and, in a union of affirmation and negation, their content is amplified towards infinity. Except for a very specific understanding of this infinity in the Thomistic metaphysics as the plenitude of the Divine existence, that is His *esse*, it remains notoriously vague and is in need of further clarification. It is not hard to notice that the Heller’s logical apophatism leads to noticeable epistemic optimism in this regard because, instead of being a barrier to knowledge, it naturally opens up new dimensions of rationality. The reason for such an outcome lies in that by shifting to abstract formal structures transcendence is not achieved by obscure intensification of negatively deanthropomorphized concepts but through transgression of limitations imposed on rationality by intuitive categories proper to the folk ontology. Ultimately, the classical emphasis on the negativity of the language in the apophatic theology turns in Heller’s logical apophatism into more positive statements on what God and the Universe are.

<sup>37</sup> Heller, “Co to znaczy, że przyroda jest matematyczna?,” 15–18.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Grygiel, *Jak scena stała się dramatem*, 267–282.

<sup>39</sup> Lakoff – Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelmsen, *Being and Knowing*, 35.

The novel character of Heller's logical apophatism becomes fully evident as he articulates the precise sense in which generalization achieved in quantum mechanics can be considered as transcendence.<sup>41</sup> The gist of this lengthy and quite sophisticated argument comes down to the assertion that generalization in the context of formalized physical theories related by the principle of correspondence can be understood as transcendence in the sense that a generalized theory establishes the limits of applicability of the preceding one. Putting things in short, a generalized theory yields sense to its precedent. Regarding transcendence as providing sense to realities that depend on it in its being is an accepted understanding of this concept in theology.<sup>42</sup> As a result, a conceptually consistent way of understanding transcendence within formalized physical theories becomes available and the *Via Transcendentiae* turns into the pursuit of sense.

As one follows Heller's extensive elaborations on the idea of the logical apophatism, one gets an impression that he quite freely proceeds in concluding on the nature of the Divine mind following the neutralization of the non-contradiction principle. It turns out the justification of the legitimacy of crossing over to the realm of transcendence can be found in Heller's theological reflections on creation in which he directly equates creation with the bestowal of sense.<sup>43</sup> Although creation is an act of the free Divine will and there is no route of logical necessity from God to creation, Heller's claim clearly opens up a channel in which the pursuit of sense within the immanent order finds its natural extension into the Divine transcendence. This, in turn, squares with one of the principle tenets of Heller's thinking that rationality is not limited to the rationality of the immanent order: "At the very foundations of our efforts to explain the Universe in terms of the Universe itself there is something unexplained that points out beyond the Universe."<sup>44</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

With the course of this study drawing to its close, it is not hard to become impressed with the originality and sophistication of Heller's idea of the logical apophatism. The full articulation of this idea required the survey of many of Heller's works because his thinking in this regard forms a kind of a *nexus mysterioirum* which needs to be reconstructed from a variety of threads scattered in seemingly unrelated sources. The logical apophatism presents itself as a coherent standpoint: while

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41 Heller, "Generalizations: From Quantum Mechanics to God," 191–210.

42 E.g., Lehmann, "Transcendence," 1734–1742.

43 Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 202–204.

44 Heller, *Science and Faith in Interaction*, 160.

retaining the key elements of the classical *Triplex Via*, *via causalitatis* and *via negationis*, it instills considerable epistemic optimism into *via eminentiae* whereby the classical emphasis on negation in the theological language shifts towards ontologically driven quest for the ultimate sense of all that exists.

However, careful insight into Heller's argumentation raises a certain concern which has clearly come up as a response to the attempts of applying the formal tools to the non-formal language of theology. In particular, this regards Józef Życiński's implementation of the *Skolem-Löwenheim Theorem* to support the concept of the *lexical openness of theology*<sup>45</sup> boldly countered with the polemical voice of Anna Lemańska.<sup>46</sup> It turns out that Życiński and Heller are both aware that their formal arguments may not get up to the full speed for the reason best expressed in the following assertion made by Heller: "The view on the world as well as the view on the religious world is not a formal system but logic has this unique ability of transferring certain logical rules from formal systems to non-formalized reasoning. The latter always profit from this."<sup>47</sup>

There is no doubt that logic cannot be taken to carry the full weight of the apophatic approach in theology. However, since the formal aspects of the theological language appear to follow strikingly similar laws in this approach as compared to its semantic layer, these aspects should be regarded as a significant factor in the ascent of the human mind to the knowledge of the Divine nature.

Another interesting outcome of this study is the clarification of the relation between the concept of anthropomorphism and apophatism. Inasmuch as considerations of the evolutionary epistemology suggest that anthropomorphism points specifically towards to the conditions of the human condition, apophatism does not have to be bound to a cognitive effort exercised by the human mind exclusively. Rather, it arises as a consequence of the disproportion between the finite cognitive capacities of any mind that could have potentially evolved in the Universe and had the infinite God as the object of cognition. For instance, if a hypothetical mind capable of acquiring knowledge of God emerged at the quantum level, its conceptual furnishing would be non-anthropomorphic with such categories as non-locality at its disposal. A fitting term for that would be "quantomorphic." Consequently, apophatism does not have to presuppose anthropomorphism and not only quantum but any finite conceptual framework can serve as a point of departure in the apophatic ascent to the knowledge of God.

Last but not least, Heller is fully aware that each abstract system of logic including that based on the category theory is but a mere construct of the human mind and

<sup>45</sup> Życiński, "Wielość interpretacji," 21–41; Życiński, *Teizm i filozofia analityczna*, 11–46.

<sup>46</sup> Lemańska, "Twierdzenie Skolema-Löwenheima," 99–108.

<sup>47</sup> Heller, *Sens życia i sens Wszechświata*, 89.

it can serve at best “as a good exercise in the “theological logic” and noting more.”<sup>48</sup> He continues: “The statement that in his thought God is compelled to use one of our systems of logic would be just another instance of anthropomorphism. In the Judeo-Christian tradition God has always been considered as the Highest Rationality, infinitely exceeding the human patterns of thought.”<sup>49</sup>

There is no doubt that Heller’s idea of the logical apophatism accentuates an important dimension of overcoming anthropomorphisms through which our modes of reasoning are enforced on how God thinks. Heller’s approach is unique in the sense that instead of studying the limitations of natural language with its corresponding classical logic in theology, it reaches out to the realm of abstractness and tries to establish these limitations from a generalized perspective. The upshot of Heller’s philosophical reflection is that it is one of the greatest anthropomorphisms to think that God thinks as we do. God thinks infinitely more.

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<sup>48</sup> Heller, *Ważniejsze niż Wszechświat*, 51.

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# Christian Apophaticism in Jean-Luc Marion's Early Works

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**Abstract:** In this article, I investigate Jean-Luc Marion's early interpretation of Christian apophaticism with special reference to his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. I observe that the most remarkable, but rarely noted, aspect of this interpretation is Marion's avoidance of the typical derivation of Dionysius' negative theology from the Platonic tradition. Instead, he places him in the tradition of the critique of idols in the Old Testament. I argue that this intuition should not be lightly dismissed as early Christian apophaticism was at least partly developed in the context of Christian polemic against pagan idolatry. If Christian apophaticism is understood against this background, Marion's claim that it foreshadows the modern and postmodern critique of theism appears more plausible than his detractors have been willing to admit.

**Keywords:** apophaticism, Pseudo-Dionysius, phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion, idolatry, metaphysics, postmodern theology, Jacques Derrida

Contemporary scholarship dealing with the history of apophaticism often takes it for granted that this can be delineated in a fairly straightforward way:<sup>1</sup> Plato's insights mainly in the *Republic*,<sup>2</sup> the *Seventh Letter*,<sup>3</sup> and the *Parmenides*<sup>4</sup> were developed into a systematic form by Middle and Neoplatonist philosophers.<sup>5</sup> Following the example of Philo of Alexandria, Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria,<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nyssa<sup>7</sup> and, chiefly, the mysterious fifth-century writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>8</sup> took over and modified those philosophical ideas. This tradition was continued and further elaborated, albeit in different ways, by medieval theologians in the Eastern and in the Western Church. On the basis of such a historical reconstruction it would appear strange indeed that postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida could even be supposed to have anything to do with the tradition of apophatic or negative theology, and Jean-Luc Marion's attempt, in some of his earlier

1 Louth, *The Origins*; Mortley, *Word to Silence*, II.

2 Cf. Plato, *Resp.* VII, 509b: The idea of the Good is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας.

3 Plato, *Ep.* 7, 341c–e.

4 The relevant passages in the *Parmenides* are the first and second hypotheses: Plato, *Parm.* 137d–146a.

5 The classical study is still: Dodds, "Parmenides."

6 Cf. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*.

7 Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 190–199. Louth, *The Origins*, 78–94. See also: Laird, "Whereof?"

8 Louth, *Denys*, 78–98.

works, to reaffirm it in critical dialogue with such post-structuralist philosophers must at best seem a benign misunderstanding and at worst a fundamental distortion of that tradition.<sup>9</sup>

There are indubitably some serious problems with Marion's reconstruction of Dionysius' thought, but I shall argue in the following that it would be rash to dismiss his reading on account of those.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I believe those problems in Marion's interpretation of Dionysius point to some deep-seated ambiguities within the specifically Christian tradition of negative theology. I shall thus argue that Marion's interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysian version of apophaticism deserves serious study insofar as it prompts the theologian to ask more fundamentally what the meaning and purpose of negative theology within Christianity could or should be.

## 1. Jean-Luc Marion: Philosopher and Theologian

Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical work is part of what a critic has called the theological turn (*tournant théologique*) of French phenomenology,<sup>11</sup> and while I am unable here to give anything like a sufficient sketch of his philosophy,<sup>12</sup> it is important to realise that Marion's more specifically theological interests and ideas have arisen in close connection with an attempt to develop further Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.<sup>13</sup> Marion believes that Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction can be extended to the point where it reveals an unconditioned phenomenon of 'pure givenness' (*étant donné*) and thus the fundamental structure of the world turns out to be based on an excess of self-giving. This, however, becomes manifest only at the end of a reflexive process designed, paradoxically, to recover strict immanence. While Marion has always insisted on a distinction between his philosophy and his theology, the structural parallels between the two are obvious and willingly admitted by

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<sup>9</sup> The phase in Marion's work on which this article is based seems to have ended at some point in the first decade of the second millennium. From *Au lieu de soi*, published in 2008, Marion's historical and theological coordinates seem to have shifted away from his earlier concern for the trajectory from Dionysius to Derrida. In *D'ailleurs, la révélation*, his latest theological work, Marion mentions Dionysius only incidentally. In Marion – Littlejohn – Rumpza, "From Idolatry," Marion refers to his early work as "a negative moment" with the sole purpose of breaking "the walls of the jail." As the present article should make clear, I do not think the author's retrospective view does justice to the theological significance of those writings. See also Jones, *Genealogy*, 153.

<sup>10</sup> A good account of legitimate criticisms in Jones, "Dionysius." See also my own earlier discussion in Zachhuber, "Jean-Luc Marion's Reading," 11–13.

<sup>11</sup> Janicaud, "Theological Turn." See also the very helpful "translator's introduction": *ibidem*, 3–15.

<sup>12</sup> Such an account is provided by Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*. See also Marion's own reflections in Marion – Littlejohn – Rumpza, "From Idolatry to Revelation."

<sup>13</sup> Marion, *Reduction*, 4–39. See also Mooney, "Hubris."

the author himself.<sup>14</sup> Just as the positive truth about reality is revealed to phenomenological research only as the result of a process seemingly designed to reduce to immanence all outward layers of transcendence,<sup>15</sup> so the theological truth of God as love becomes manifest only after the complete destruction of his idolatrous representations. This has a number of immediate consequences: First, the radical otherness of God is revealed by careful attention to reality as it is – not by turning away from it. Second, God's commitment to us is recognised alongside his majestic distance from us.<sup>16</sup> Third, there is resistance to both – our encounter with the phenomenon as well as our recognition of God, and this resistance needs to be overcome through a critical and, as such, destructive movement. No knowledge of God without critique of the idol; no understanding of reality without phenomenological reduction.

In this manner, the early Marion integrated into both his philosophical and his theological project the postmodern critique of metaphysics as a necessary liberation of “the other” from the shackles of visual or conceptual constraints. Only when we have forsaken any such attempt to bring the other under our control are we capable of receiving it in its selfless superabundance.

## 2. Apophaticism and the Critique of Metaphysics

It is this very insight, which, according to the early Marion, has been contained in, and expressed by, the Christian tradition of negative theology.<sup>17</sup> In the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, he argues, a fundamental critique of metaphysics is not merely anticipated, but actually present in a way that rivals and ultimately outdoes its more recent secular manifestations. There is a subtle, dialectical polemic underlying this postulate. Marion is aware, of course, that Derrida himself rejected this parallel,<sup>18</sup> but he insinuates that for the secular philosopher such a rejection is a necessity as to do otherwise would be to undermine the very project he seeks to advance:

This quasi-deconstruction [sc. in negative theology] cannot be said simply to anticipate, unknowingly, the authentic deconstruction since it claims to reach *in fine* what it deconstructs: It claims to put us in the presence of God in the very degree to which it denies all

<sup>14</sup> Marion, *Being Given*, 71–74, with n. 2 (p. 342) and Carlson, “Translator’s Introduction.”

<sup>15</sup> The famous ‘third reduction’: Marion, *Reduction*, 192–198.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the title of his early theological work – Marion, *Idole et la distance!*

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Marion’s use of the apophatic tradition cf. Jones, *Genealogy*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the discussion between Marion and Derrida, documented in Caputo – Scanlon, *God*. Paul Roquemore (“Negative Theologies,” 458) thinks Derrida “was correct” to distance himself from Dionysius and Eckhart.

presence. Negative theology does not furnish deconstruction with new material or an unconscious forerunner, but with its first serious rival, perhaps the only one possible.<sup>19</sup>

In dealing with Derrida's engagement with apophaticism, then, one would need to exercise the very hermeneutic of suspicion the philosopher of deconstruction himself practiced in his own readings of past texts. It cannot be denied that, should Marion be successful in his argument, this would have serious consequences not only for theology, but also and perhaps above all for postmetaphysical philosophy, whose relationship with theology would by necessity appear more complex than many of its practitioners are currently willing to admit. This notwithstanding, I shall not here be concerned with this latter question, but instead seek to elucidate some aspects and consequences of the theological side of Marion's thesis.

I take it that the latter starts from the premise, which is at once obvious and non-trivial, that theo-logy as a discourse of the unsayable is in constant need of reminding itself of its own inadequacy. All theology then is in some sense apophatic; at the same time and by the same token, "apophaticism" if understood as a system would be an oxymoron or worse, a travesty: it would be the supreme form of idolatry. Rather, apophaticism serves as a reminder that theology ought to speak about God in a way that is, or at least attempts to be, radically aware of the complications and contradictions involved in this very exercise. Yet if this is true, such an insight cannot only function as a methodological rule guiding the individual theologian; it must apply to theological discourse in its entirety. Theology thus inevitably becomes unstable, polymorphous, and radically exposed to the risk of failure. More specifically, theological discourse must constantly engender and include its own critique, and this, one might say, in its most radical form precisely is negative or apophatic theology.<sup>20</sup>

Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical-theological interest in Dionysius goes back to the very beginning of his academic career. The first substantial engagement with the corpus of Dionysian writings, which to this day has remained the most extensive one, is contained in his early study, *Idole et la distance*. This was originally published in 1977 but has been translated into English only in 2001,<sup>21</sup> a full ten years after Marion's major theological work, *Dieu sans l'être*, had been made available to the English reader<sup>22</sup> and some time still after the author's memorable exchange with Jacques Derrida and others at Villanova University in 1997, which I have mentioned before. This inverted order of publication in English notwithstanding, it is Marion's early study of Pseudo-Dionysius that must serve as the starting point of any serious

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<sup>19</sup> Marion, "In the Name," 22.

<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I treat these two expressions as equivalent.

<sup>21</sup> Marion, *Idol*.

<sup>22</sup> Marion, *God*. Note the ambiguity in the French title which is lost in the translation.

assessment of his appropriation of negative theology during the early decades of his scholarly career.

#### 4. Marion's Interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius

*Idole et la distance* unmistakably betrays the intellectual world of the early 1970s. It is one of several attempts of responding theologically to the radical "death-of-God" debate of the late 1960s. Not quite unlike others who wrote at that time, one recalls the notable example of Eberhard Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World*,<sup>23</sup> Marion seeks to address this constellation by teasing out its own genuinely theological potential: "Those who meditated on the 'death of God' most decisively – Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and a few others (among whom Feuerbach is not) – read in that pronouncement something completely other than a refutation of the (existence of) God. They recognized in it the paradoxical but radical manifestation of the divine."<sup>24</sup>

In the course of the book, Pseudo-Dionysius is coupled together with two of those thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin, as a representative of those inhabiting what Marion calls the "marches" of metaphysics, a borderline area that is already indicative of what lies beyond.<sup>25</sup> This "beyond" Marion perceives, in theological language echoed by Martin Heidegger,<sup>26</sup> as the Word of the Cross, ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ (cf. 1 Cor 1:18), in and through which philosophy, and for Marion this means specifically metaphysics, is revealed as folly: "To take seriously that philosophy is a folly means, for us, first (although not exclusively) taking seriously that the 'God' of ontotheology is rigorously equivalent to an idol, that which is presented by the Being of beings thought metaphysically."<sup>27</sup>

Marion's appeal to Dionysius then is, from the very outset, situated within an argument that contrasts rather sharply with the conventional narrative that sees in him the facilitator of a Platonic-Christian synthesis.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the fact that Marion in his earliest work thinks of Dionysius as part of the "marches" of metaphysics and does not (yet) claim that he achieved deconstruction *avant la lettre* is an implicit nod recognising the undeniable presence of Platonic metaphysics in his writing. Be this however as it may, there can be no doubt that, for Marion, Dionysius' writing is above all an attempt to execute St Paul's intimation of a discourse alternative to the philosophy

<sup>23</sup> Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*.

<sup>24</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 208 quoted in Marion, *Idol*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 81–88.

of his time. The latter intention Marion finds expressed most radically in the Areopagus speech of Acts 17, which in his reading equates the “conceptual idolatry” of Epicureans and Stoics with the more obvious idolatry of Athenian religious life.<sup>29</sup> As is well known, in Luke’s narrative Paul’s speech divides his audience: some ridicule him and turn away (Acts 17:32) but some others, including a certain Dionysius, are converted (17:34). Whoever the real author behind the Dionysian corpus may have been,<sup>30</sup> his literary persona is none other than this Athenian convert. What is the significance of this choice of pseudonym? Surely, the mere fact of St Paul’s encounter with Greek philosophers on that occasion is notable and was undoubtedly intended as such by the narrator, whatever his sources for this particular event may have been. Yet what exactly this key New Testament text is meant to tell us about the relationship between Christianity and philosophy is much more difficult to ascertain.<sup>31</sup> Marion, at any event, decides to interpret it alongside Paul’s critical remarks about the “wisdom of this world” in 1 Cor 1:20, and it is in this light that he considers the decision of the anonymous fifth-century author to call himself Dionysius: “Hence nothing could be more rigorous than to complete [sc. *Idole et la distance*] with a reading of Denys, a text that the recollection of the discourse to the Athenians inaugurates – the one issues, as certainly as paradoxically, from the other.”<sup>32</sup>

It is this basic intuition that provides the hermeneutical premise for Marion’s interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius’ writing. These texts are fundamentally understood as developing the Pauline insight of a contrast between the idolatrous discourse of metaphysics and an alternative language inspired by the very “death of God” on the cross.

What makes this alternative possible, in Marion’s view, is recognition of distance. In a move that is clearly inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas,<sup>33</sup> Marion reconstructs the fateful history of metaphysics as a series of attempts to gain totalitarian control over being by forcing it into the presence of the reflective mind, a history which for Marion culminates in Martin Heidegger.<sup>34</sup> Husserl’s phenomenological reductions, whose importance for Marion has already been noted, are here seen as the inevitable critique of those constructions. In the same way, knowledge of God can only become possible by foregoing the deep-seated human desire to *make* him present in favour of a willingness to let him approach and address us. In this sense, recognition of distance only permits and enables a true encounter with God as with any “other”; this ultimately is the core of biblical teaching.

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<sup>29</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 23–24.

<sup>30</sup> On the question of Dionysius’ identity see now the important study by Mainoldi, *Dietro “Dionigi l’Areopagita”*.

<sup>31</sup> Sandnes, “Paul”; Soards, *Speeches*, 95–100.

<sup>32</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. esp. Levinas, *Totality*.

<sup>34</sup> Marion, “La double idolâtrie,” 67–94.

In reconstructing how this insight is expressed in Dionysius, Marion took his starting point, with Étienne Gilson and many others,<sup>35</sup> from God's self-revelation in Exod 3:14: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה.<sup>36</sup> This expression has been translated in two different ways: "I am who I am," is the rendering often preferred by scholars of Hebrew, whereas the Septuagint, followed by the Vulgate and much of traditional Christian theology, read, "I am the one who is" (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν). These two translations, Marion urges, should not however be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect the fact that this biblical verse expresses precisely the unity of revelation and concealment,<sup>37</sup> of manifestation and distance: "The name ... delivers the unthinkable, as the unthinkable that *gives* itself; this same unthinkable also gives *itself*, and hence withdraws within the anterior distance that governs the gift of the Name. The Name delivers and steals away in one and the same movement."<sup>38</sup>

By not offering a "real" name, God makes himself known. By demanding that his distance must be respected, he communicates his being. By rejecting idolatrous appropriations of himself, he permits true community. This paradoxical self-revelation of God both requires and allows to be uttered in a new and different kind of theological language. A move is required, as Marion puts it, "from a model of language in which the speaker makes an effort to take possession of meaning to a model in which the speaker receives meaning."<sup>39</sup> Conventional, predicative structures of language have to be denied in order for the revelation of God to be accepted. Speaking of God is speaking without speaking, as much as knowledge of God is *docta ignorantia*. Marion quotes the words of St Paul: "If someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know in what way it is suitable to know: but if someone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor 8:2–3).<sup>40</sup>

It is not difficult to recognise in this programmatic demand for an alternative theological language Marion's original thesis that the "word of the cross" gave rise to nonmetaphysical God-talk. Characteristically, in his early work Marion emphasises the continuity between the two Testaments and, specifically, the hermeneutical indispensability of the Mosaic covenant for a proper understanding of the New Testament. In his overall interest to cleanse theological language of "ontological" vocabulary, which is the hallmark of his later work, he obscures this parallel by stressing the utter novelty of God's revelation as "love" in the New Testament. Yet his original intuition may have been the better one hinting, albeit mostly implicitly, at the identity

<sup>35</sup> See Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 80–82 on Gilson and the "Metaphysics of Exodus."

<sup>36</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 141–142. Underlying Marion's later argument in *God Without Being* is a more critical stance towards Exod 3:14, which he thinks has been "reversed" by 1 John 4:18 (see Marion, *God*, xx).

<sup>37</sup> There is an echo here of Karl Barth's famous theory of revelation-in-concealment in his *Church Dogmatics*: Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, §5,4.

<sup>38</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 142.

<sup>39</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 144.

<sup>40</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 145.

between the God who revealed himself without visual representations (Exod 20:4) and the crucified one who in paradoxical language is called the “*icon* of the invisible God” (Col 1:15<sup>41</sup>).

It is precisely the theological difficulty posed by this biblical idea of God’s revelation-in-concealment that Marion reconstructs as the backdrop to the so-called negative theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius: “Language carries out its discourse to the point of negation and silence. But just as the death that is refused according to the love matures into Resurrection, so silence nourishes infinite proclamation.”<sup>42</sup>

Two steps are discerned but also conjoined here: the first is negative, critical in the narrower sense of that term. It delegitimises inappropriate attempts to obtain knowledge of God through visual or conceptual “idols.” Its end product is denial of any expression and, ultimately, silence. This progression cannot be avoided or sidestepped. Yet it is not in itself the end. Rather, it is followed by a transition to a new and different and ultimately rather wordy language: “silence nourishes infinite proclamation.” These two successive operations effect a reconfiguration of language, a “linguistic model of the dispossession of meaning,” and this, in Marion’s view, is the essence of Dionysius’ “negative theology.”<sup>43</sup> It is the former of those two steps that has been advanced by the critique of metaphysics in Nietzsche and Heidegger; yet whatever its achievement, it is of value only insofar as it serves the ultimately theological purpose of making room for the establishment of a radically different discourse based on the principle of love. The modern and postmodern critique of metaphysical theism, therefore, is correct and appropriate, but ultimately only an extension of the traditional theological critique of “idols” and does not deny the legitimacy of proper theology, but – rightly understood – enables it.

It is important, if also idiosyncratic, that negative theology for Marion has this dual aspect. It is in the first instance a *critical* discourse, an exercise intended to escape idolatry. Such idolatry would include, but not be limited to, the naïve visual representations of God. Its more dangerous objects are attributes and concepts applied to God by philosophical or theological language: “To avoid such an idolatry, one must ... *deny* attributes as imperfections.”<sup>44</sup>

One must, more specifically, deny every attribute including the loftiest ones, such as One, Unity, Divinity, or Goodness. Yet even this is not all for it might appear that the negation itself reveals the being of God. If understood in this way, however, negative theology itself would still be, in Marion’s words, “idolatrous.”<sup>45</sup> This is what happens, ironically, in atheism, which “by force of negations literally dissolves what

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41 See Marion, *Idol*, 18.

42 Marion, *Idol*, 144.

43 Marion, *Idol*, 144–145.

44 Marion, *Idol*, 146.

45 Marion, *Idol*, 147.



those negations supposedly aim at, and destroys the Absolute.”<sup>46</sup> It is in this sense, and in this sense only that, as Marion formulates with Claude Bruaire, “negative theology is the negation of all theology. Its truth is atheism.”<sup>47</sup>

In Dionysius, however, this critical, *apophatic* discourse is, according to Marion, justified only to the extent that it leads to, and entails, its own negation. While its practice may take the theologian to the far end of a precipice or indeed into the abyss of a godforsaken world, it also takes him beyond that point. As God is revealed in the words of Christ on the cross, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?,”<sup>48</sup> so the most radical negation of divine predicates postulates God as being beyond affirmation and negation. Thus, we read in the *Mystical Theology*: “... nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to it, for although we may affirm or deny the things below it, we can neither affirm nor deny it, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all.”<sup>49</sup>

What does this mean in practice? Marion observes that the Syrian author is still willing to use one word for God until the end, and this is cause (αἰτία). In this notion, he suggests, is contained precisely the unity of distance and intimacy that permits us to move beyond the impasse of pure apophaticism: “Anterior distance ... governs positively that which it allows to be received in it. We have not thus distanced ourselves from Denys’s position, but we have slowly approached what he indicates under the name of Goodness, when he assigns it to the cause/αἰτία.”<sup>50</sup>

At the vantage point of utter negation, it becomes possible to relate to God in a new way. Dionysius knows, Marion contends, of a *third way* beyond affirmation and negation, and this is adumbrated by his mention of “cause” at the every end of the *Mystical Theology*.<sup>51</sup> Cause, of course, must not here mean the *causa sui* of metaphysics, but it indicates that God is beyond affirmation and negation insofar as he is love, pure giving or indeed, as the *Divine Names* suggest, goodness.<sup>52</sup> Goodness and cause, Marion maintains, are interchangeable; goodness is the first name of God, according to the *Divine Names*, thus the upshot of Dionysius’ theology is the view that intimacy and distance are but two sides of the same coin. “Revelation communicates the very intimacy of God – distance itself.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 147.

<sup>47</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 147. See Bruaire, *Droit*, 21. On Bruaire who had a profound influence on Marion, see López, *Spirit's Gift*.

<sup>48</sup> Marion, apparently, does not make use of the ‘cry of dereliction’ in his argument, but many others have done so. An overview is given by Yocum, “Cry of Dereliction,” 73–74.

<sup>49</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* V (Rorem – Luidbhéid, 141).

<sup>50</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 151. For Marion’s use of the ‘third way’ cf. Jones, “Dionysius,” 747–748.

<sup>52</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 154–155.

<sup>53</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 157.

Marion's interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic theology has not been affected in its essentials by a number of shifts in his theological and philosophical views between the mid-70s and the end of the millennium. For the purposes of the present study, it is therefore legitimate to treat this first reading of the Patristic author as his considered view of the matter during this period even though a full analysis, which cannot here be given, would have to include a detailed treatment of *God without Being*, Marion's theological masterpiece. In assessing Marion's account, the first question that springs to mind would seem to be how faithful it is to the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and, more broadly, to early Christian apophatic theology. In asking like this, the reader takes for granted that Marion intended to offer a historical interpretation of Patristic negative theology. Whether this is the case, however, and if so to what extent such an intention determines his actual reading of the fifth century corpus, seems far from obvious. In 1997, as we saw earlier, Marion insisted that Dionysius had in fact offered not only an early version of deconstruction, but one that in important ways is superior to its contemporary, secular forms. If this is what he really believes, engagement with the critique of metaphysics and with post-metaphysical thought would merely be an extraneous job for the theologian, useful for apologetic purposes, but without inherent value for his own theological project. It seems, however, unlikely that this is Marion's own opinion.<sup>54</sup> He clearly understands that the philosophical critique of metaphysics is relevant for theology insofar as – the merits of the apophatic tradition notwithstanding – most Christian theologians had taken for granted a metaphysical foundation throughout the centuries. At the very least then he would have to grant a hermeneutical function to those critical philosophers with regard to the Dionysian Corpus, as it appears that only through their radical lens a full appreciation of the groundbreaking nature of his writing has become possible. In fact, a stronger interpretation is not unlikely; if Dionysius' views about the God beyond affirmation and negation only receive their full sense from the vantage point of the “death of God,” then the modern critique of religion and theism had its own unique contribution to make to the proper self-understanding of Christianity. As much as the “death of God” was only possible *because of* the historical gospel of the crucified God,<sup>55</sup> so it was only by virtue of that intellectual and historical datum that the full extent of faith's subversion of the “wisdom of the world” could be grasped and articulated.

Within the confines of this paper, it is impossible fully to explore this line of thought. Even such a brief sketch should be sufficient, however, to guard against a merely historicist critique of Marion's argument. While it is necessary and indeed

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Marion's declaration that “the right that one can claim to submit certain thinkers to a theological approach escapes the danger of a trivial recuperation only if it goes hand in hand with the conviction that *a theological contribution can come to us from those same thinkers* [Emphasis mine]” (Marion, *Idol*, 22, n. 19).

<sup>55</sup> Marion, *Idol*, 1.

relevant to gauge the distance between his reading of the Dionysian Corpus and its historical meaning (so far as the latter can be established), this in itself only brings to the surface a question Marion does not address; it does not however answer it. The mere fact, in other words, that a certain interpretation only becomes possible in the light of recent historical developments, does not in itself make this a bad interpretation, but it raises the question of why it should be a good one. There arguably are several answers to the latter question,<sup>56</sup> but the one I shall presuppose in what follows is that an interpretation is justifiable where it actualises a potential meaning that is historically plausible even if it is not made explicit in the text itself. Specifically, I shall argue that while Marion's interpretation faces considerable exegetical difficulties in Dionysius' writings, his intuition of a critical dimension in Patristic use of apophatic discourse is much closer to historical truth than certain textbook accounts would suggest.

## 5. Apophatic and Kataphatic Language in Pseudo-Dionysius

While any interpretation of the Dionysian corpus is fraught with difficulties and uncertainties, there are good reasons for objecting to a number of assumptions Marion makes in his reading of those texts. Dionysius offers to his readers essentially two ways of speaking about God – the *kataphatic* way based on the possibility of naming the divine mainly through names revealed in Scripture; and the *apophatic* way, which uses increasingly few words and ends in silence. The former of those is developed primarily in his writing *The Divine Names* whereas the latter has its exposition in the brief, but highly influential treatise *On the Mystical Theology*. At the beginning of the latter writing, Dionysius relates the two by reviewing his broader oeuvre, a review, which puzzlingly includes references to works, most people agree never existed.<sup>57</sup> Be this as it may, Dionysius equates the kataphatic in the first place with dogmatic theology (allegedly dealt with in a work entitled *Theological Representations*); the *Divine Names* apparently fall into the same rubric as does a treatise called *Symbolic Theology*, which is said to have contained a reflection on “metaphorical titles drawn from the world of sense and applied to the nature of God.”<sup>58</sup> The apophatic, on the other hand, is the approach practiced in *The Mystical Theology*. Connected to these distinctions, Dionysius further suggests, is the degree of prolixity the author will exercise in his writing:

<sup>56</sup> I have argued elsewhere that reception history could be a way of mitigating the hiatus between historical and systematic readings of an author such as Dionysius: Zachhuber, “Jean-Luc Marion's Reading.”

<sup>57</sup> An exception to this rule is Balthasar, *Glory*, 154–164.

<sup>58</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* III.

I feel sure you have noticed how these latter [sc. the elaborations of the *Symbolic Theology*] come much more abundantly than what went before, since *The Theological Representations* and a discussion of the names of God are evidently briefer than what can be said in *The Symbolic Theology*. The fact is that the more we take the flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.<sup>59</sup>

It will be noted that Dionysius here makes no reference whatever to the notion so central to Marion's reconstruction that the silence resulting from the apophatic way is subsequently transformed into "infinite proclamation" as part of an alternative theological discourse. He presents the two kinds of discourse, kataphatic and apophatic, as two equally valid and equally necessary ways of talking and writing about God without giving an indication as to whether one necessarily comes before or after the other: "What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being."<sup>60</sup>

One *might* possibly argue that what is proposed here implies that the affirmative discourse must come first if only because predicates cannot be denied before they have been affirmed. One might further speculate about the precise force of Dionysius' remark that negation is "more appropriate" than affirmation, especially when seen in the light of his willingness to call the first principle "Cause" without apparent reservation. Whatever the impact of such subtle interpretative questions may be, however, it seems indubitable that *prima facie* Dionysius here characterises the two ways as complementary and fundamentally equivalent to each other. Both are necessary if one wishes to speak properly about the Cause of all beings.

Yet such an observation in important ways leaves open the actual significance of the two ways Dionysius practices. *Prima facie* affirming and negating the very same predicates of the same subject is simply contradictory. If this twofold way of speaking about God is to have any meaning, some relation must obtain between them. The solution adopted by Dionysius' Platonic teachers ascribed affirmative and negative statements ultimately to different entities, the participated and the unparticipated One respectively.<sup>61</sup> Such a position Dionysius is unlikely to have found congenial. An alternative solution is formulated by Denys Turner and Oliver Davies:

59 Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* III (Rorem – Luibhéid, 139).

60 Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I (Rorem – Luibhéid, 136).

61 Carabine, *Unknown God*, 174.

The interdependence of the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names* shows the dialectical pulsation between affirmations and negations that characterises the enterprise of Christian negative theology as a whole. Here negation is not free-standing but secures the theological character of the affirmative speech-patterns in address to God or in speech about God. Being cancelled in this way they are shown not to be ordinary language use at all, but speech that is burdened to the point of excess: as exhausted as it is full.<sup>62</sup>

In this interpretation, Dionysius' apophatic discourse, however important it may be, is ultimately subordinated to an affirmative mode of theology. While it may be indispensable, it can never do more than qualify, albeit in a crucial manner, kataphatic God-talk. It guards against the abuse of affirmative language, especially probably against its univocal application in matters divine. Any attempt, therefore, to construe negative theology along the lines of the modern critique of metaphysics or religion fails to the extent that it takes negative theology out of this vital connection with the Church's proclamation of theological truth.

It appears that the strength of this reading is essentially the weakness of its alternative. In other words, the view espoused by Turner and Davies derives much of its plausibility from the difficulties Marion's postmodern interpretation encounters at the exegetical level. There simply is not much evidence, if any, that Dionysius' apophatic theology is meant to be "critical" of religious or metaphysical idols as such. The negations in his *Mystical Theology* concern predicates the Bible and the Christian tradition used and continued to use of God; in other words, these predicates represent the contents of divine revelation. It is hardly imaginable that Dionysius would have thought the *kataphatic* way of speaking about God was idolatrous. He certainly never says so, and it is extremely difficult to believe that even in his most daring moments he had an inkling that this might be the case.

Dionysius does indeed, at the outset of the *Mystical Theology*, refer to the two types of idolatries Marion so strongly emphasises. He expressly rejects those "who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place,"<sup>63</sup> and those "who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being."<sup>64</sup> It would be intriguing to think that this is an oblique reference to the philosophers and the popular idolaters of Acts 17:16, 18. However, these low-minded people are mentioned as those from whom the contents of the present writing must be hidden; their reprehensible views are not in any obvious way connected to the negations Dionysius goes on to detail in the treatise.

<sup>62</sup> Davies – Turner, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>63</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I 2 (Rorem – Luibhéid, 136). The reference is to Ps 18:11.

<sup>64</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I 2.

Evidence, then, that Dionysius' exercise in apophatic theology is meant to be "critical" in the modern sense seems slim. The problem becomes, if anything, more acute once one considers the entire Dionysian Corpus, not just the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names*. Dionysius' theology as a whole is characterised by its adoption of the Neoplatonic sacred cosmos structured hierarchically in the angelic and the ecclesial order. None of this is affected by the apophatic critique. Negative theology, it appears, functions perfectly well within a kind of theological *Gesamtkunstwerk* of which it is one important aspect, but no more than that.

At the same time, the virtual absence of evidence supporting Marion's reading of negative theology as radically critical should not blind us to the exegetical weakness of the interpretative premise in Turner's and Davies' argument. Whatever may be the case for Christian negative theology as a whole, it seems difficult to pin down with certainty the "dialectical pulsation" between the *Mystical Theology* and the rest of the corpus not least because Dionysius' other works do not contain references to it and the few passages in this writing that discuss this relationship are, as we have seen, much less committal than either Turner/Davies or Marion would wish to make us believe. The truth is, or so it would seem, that the place and the role Dionysius meant to assign to apophaticism for theology as a whole is sketched by him in a way that is far from conclusive, and it is for this reason that all those who interpret it do so by taking into account, whether explicitly or not, contextual information that is supposed to be relevant for an evaluation of Dionysius' own thinking.

## 6. Early Christian Apophaticism and the Critique of Pagan Idolatry

It is at this point that the larger issue, broached at the outset of this essay, of the history of negative theology becomes relevant. There seems to be but little doubt that for most modern interpretations of the Dionysian Corpus its closeness to Platonic patterns of thought and argument is a major point of departure.<sup>65</sup> While for some this link served to justify a highly critical attitude towards those writings,<sup>66</sup> many of those who commended them still saw their syncretism and their willingness to embrace a wide range of philosophical and religious terms of non-Christian origin, as their hallmark. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, praises Dionysius as the first Greek theologian who stood apart from the spirit of controversy so characteristic of the early centuries and who was therefore able to use affirmatively

<sup>65</sup> The most recent full exposition of the philosophical background of Pseudo-Dionysius is to be found in: Wear – Dillon, *Dionysius*.

<sup>66</sup> Most notoriously, perhaps, Martin Luther (*Church Held Captive*, 225) who called him "more like a Platonist than a Christian." For the context see further Zachhuber, "Dionysius."

Gnostic, Manichaean, and Neoplatonic ideas with only “a few corrections from time to time”<sup>67</sup>: “What was once historical, temporally conditioned reality becomes for Denys a means for expressing an utterly universal theological content. ... Each thought-form of which he makes use will, at this touch, be liberated from its historical context and exalted into eternity.”<sup>68</sup>

Such a reading of the Dionysian Corpus is, in a sense, not surprising. After all, the demonstration of massive borrowings or at least literal parallels between his work and the writings of Proclus, the Neoplatonist, stands at the origin of modern Dionysian scholarship.<sup>69</sup> It nevertheless bears recalling that literary dependence is rarely if ever sufficient to explain the main ideas and tendencies of a major work. In other words, however impressive the presence of Proclean language in the Dionysian Corpus may be, this does not in itself prove that Dionysius’ understanding and use of apophatic theology was the same as that encountered in the great Athenian philosopher. More specifically, it is doubtful whether in the absence of clear textual evidence within the Dionysian Corpus for the relationship between affirmative and negative theology, the substitution of evidence from Platonic parallels is methodologically legitimate. Reading Dionysius against this backdrop, admittedly, makes it all but inevitable to deny his apophatic theology any critical edge; one major concern of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology* is, after all, to provide a philosophical underpinning for the traditional sacred cosmos of Greek religion.<sup>70</sup> Yet whether Dionysius’ use of texts such as this warrants the hermeneutical conclusion that the Neoplatonic model of affirmative and negative theology is normative for the Areopagite as well, should be treated as an open question.

This question cannot be further pursued here, but articulating it serves to throw into sharp relief what really is most unusual about Marion’s interpretation of Dionysius’ apophaticism, namely his insistence to read Dionysius without any regard to Platonic theories of negation and instead against the backdrop of Scripture. As we saw earlier, his justification for reconstructing Dionysius’ apophatic theology as a critique of idols was drawn on the one hand from the Old Testament revelation of God in the burning bush (Exod 3:14) and on the other hand from a combined reading of Paul’s critical comments about the wisdom of the world and the “word of the cross” in his first letter to the Corinthians, and his Areopagus speech according to Acts 17. The latter in particular served as the point of contact to Dionysius who, whatever his historical identity, decided to employ the name of Paul’s Athenian convert.

Whatever the merits of this move for the direct interpretation of the Dionysian Corpus, there is considerable historical evidence corroborating Marion’s

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<sup>67</sup> Balthasar, *Glory*, 152.

<sup>68</sup> Balthasar, *Glory*, 152.

<sup>69</sup> Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius*; Stiglmayr, “Neuplatoniker Proclus.”

<sup>70</sup> Bonnefoy, *Greek and Egyptian*, 60–65.

intuition of a connection between Christian negative theology and the polemical critique of “idols.” This evidence has been gathered almost exactly forty years ago by D.W. Palmer, but it has hardly ever been brought to bear on the wider question of Christian apophaticism.<sup>71</sup> Palmer studied the use of negative attributes for God by the Christian apologists of the second century and found it closely related to their defence against the charge of atheism. This charge, as is well known, was countered by the countercharge that the Pagans themselves were atheists since they ignored the one, true God.<sup>72</sup> This is classically formulated in the words of Justin Martyr: “Hence we have been called atheists and we admit that we are atheists as far as these so-called gods are concerned.”<sup>73</sup>

Commenting on this statement, Eric F. Osborn expressed himself in words strikingly reminiscent of Marion and Bruaire: “Half his [sc. Justin’s] account of God is atheistic or negative. The ‘gods’ of the established religion, who beget and are begotten, who speak and are spoken of and who see and are, as idols, seen – these gods do not exist. God is unbegotten, ineffable, and invisible.”<sup>74</sup>

This connection between the inverted charge of atheism, the rejection of idols, and the use of negative attributes for God, Palmer goes on to demonstrate, is prevalent throughout the second century in all those writers loosely connected by the epithet “apologetic.” Thus the early second century *Kerygma Petri* argues that as creator God is “the Invisible who sees all things; the Incomprehensible who comprehends all things; the One who needs nothing, of whom all things stand in need.”<sup>75</sup> It is for this reason that pagan worship is illegitimate. It is for this reason also that the idea of sacrifice is rejected. Thus the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus* chastises the Jews for their sacrificial ritual: they “ought to regard it as foolishness, not reverence, that they offer these things to God as though he were in need.”<sup>76</sup> And the apologist Aristides uses the idea that “no man has ever seen to whom He is like; nor is he able to see him,” to reject worship of “dead idols” and sacrifices: “God is not needy and none of those things is sought for by him.”<sup>77</sup>

Much of this admittedly is familiar within the Greek tradition itself, which since the fifth century BCE has had its own philosophical critique of anthropomorphic religion. In fact, it has rightly been observed that the resulting philosophical monotheism is in many ways similar to that of the early Christians.<sup>78</sup> However, Palmer is

71 Palmer, “Atheism.”

72 Harnack, *Vorwurf*.

73 Justin, *I. Apol.* 6,1. English translation in Osborn, *Justin*, 17.

74 Osborn, *Justin Martyr*, 17.

75 *Kerygma Petri* = Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* VI, 5, 39, 3. Palmer, “Atheism,” 238.

76 Anonymous, *Epistula ad Diognetum* 3, 3. Palmer, “Atheism,” 239.

77 Aristides, *Apologia* 13 (Syriac Version). Palmer, “Atheism,” 240. See nn. 46–47 for the text critical problems with this text.

78 Cf. the various papers in: Athanassiadi – Frede, *Pagan Monotheism*, and esp. the contribution by Frede himself.



surely right to insist that “the concern of Greek and Roman writers, who deal with idolatry, seems rather different to that of Judaism. The Jews aim to reject pagan deities as being merely material. The pagan writers, when they were not merely making a joke, wished to distinguish between mere images and true deity.”<sup>79</sup> To the extent then that early Christianity took over Jewish concerns, their insistence that neither visual images nor mental concepts could adequately represent God implies polemical rejection of traditional pagan religion in a way the philosophical critique of educated Greeks or Romans did not.

This is still a far cry from the modern and postmodern “critical” philosophies. Jewish and Christian apologists practice a critique of idols in order to confess all the more strongly the truth of the God who revealed himself through Scripture and, for Christianity, in the Incarnation. Yet while it is thus undoubtedly true that the *ultimate* purpose of those denials is the affirmation of the biblical God, this is not their *only* and, in many ways, not their *immediate* purpose. God is elevated above material and intellectual perfections in order to exclude his identification with pagan or quasi-pagan, “idolatrous” objects of worship. This same God, however, is in his turn meant to be the object of religious worship. It is not difficult to perceive the tension that must result from this twin claim, a tension that may be temporarily defused but can hardly be permanently resolved. Any Christian conception of God, any visual or indeed intellectual representation of him, would inevitably, sooner or later, be exposed to the very same critique that the earliest theologians found convenient to use against the dominant religious culture of their day. At the same time, insofar as those critics would inevitably find their critique on an affirmation, the latter would sooner or later make them targets of precisely the same kind of critique.

In this way, one can indeed draw a line from the critique of idols in the earliest Christian theologies to the radical critique of religion in modernity and postmodernity. Yet for Marion’s most fundamental and most original argument this observation is only the first step. Quite what, he asks, comes to be perceived once this critique has been carried out? What is its purpose, what is – literally – revealed by this operation? The answer he gives is, in a rather unrefined way, anticipated once again by an early apologist. The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, having rejected various pagan ideas of God by means of negative theology, commends God’s revelation through Jesus Christ: “No man saw God nor made him known, but he revealed himself; and he revealed through faith, through which alone it has been made possible to see God.”<sup>80</sup>

If this combination of the absolute negation of divine perfections with belief in divine revelation through and in a human being is anything more than the perverse substitution of one set of idols by another, then it might well be that it is precisely the ostensibly ungodly appearance of Jesus including his shameful death on the cross

<sup>79</sup> Palmer, “Atheism,” 255.

<sup>80</sup> Anonymous, *Epistula ad Diognetum* 8, 5–6. Palmer, “Atheism,” 239.

(cf. Gal 3:13) that allows to perceive God in a way not achieved by *kataphatic* or *apophatic* speculation as such, namely as the God of love whose freely given gift calls for a response encapsulated in the double command to love God and your neighbour (Luke 10:27; cf. Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18). It is this mutual love that is constantly impeded by the “idols” of our own making as they bar us from recognising the other as other. Their critique therefore is needed to tear down that barrier, but the criterion of its success can be no other than the reality of mutual recognition and mutual love that it enables and sets free.

Once again one may doubt that Pseudo-Dionysius is the most obvious point of departure for such a reading of Christian apophaticism; a recent survey of different types of apophatic approaches within Christian theology certainly suggests otherwise<sup>81</sup> indicating that the “incarnational apophatic” was developed by baffled readers of the Areopagite who either sought respectfully to correct him (Maximus Confessor<sup>82</sup>) or sharply rebuked him for the very absence of the “word of the cross” from his ruminations (Martin Luther<sup>83</sup>).

## Conclusion

While there are, then, some serious flaws in Jean-Luc Marion’s early interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysius, the French thinker was surely justified in his more fundamental intuition to recover in modern and postmodern critical philosophies a motif that has been equally foundational for Jewish and Christian attempts to articulate the God of biblical revelation, while insisting that that motif, “negation,” is constantly in danger of undermining itself unless it is recognised in its positive function of uncovering what, in phenomenological language, he calls “pure givenness” while in the Christian idiom it is the God of love. In many ways, serious theological questions only begin to emerge at this point. What is the appropriate “response” Christians are called to give to this revelation? Is it really “praise” as Marion suggests, or is it not, in the first instance, discipleship and the *practice* of love? In other words, should not the Christianity emerging from Marion’s critical apophatic theology be more ethical than aesthetic? And further, what does the transformation of language Marion demands as a result of apophatic insight mean for the form and the content of theology itself? It would seem arguable that traditional dogmatic theology, which comes mostly in propositional form and constantly betrays its metaphysical underpinnings,

<sup>81</sup> Rorem, “Negative Theologies,” 458–463.

<sup>82</sup> Maximus Confessor, *Capita de caritate* II 76. See Louth, *Maximus*, 52–54.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Luther, *Enarratio Psalmi XC*, in *Weimarer Ausgabe*, XL/3, 543, 11–12: “Nos autem, si vere volumus Theologiam negativam definire, statuemus eam esse sanctam Crucem et tentationes.”

has to be fundamentally challenged and reformed. By and large, however, the early Marion was reluctant seriously to tackle any of those issues but was content to defend doctrine in its traditional garment – and this certainly has not changed in his later works.

Part of the reason for this remarkable contrast between his radical call to re-think the foundations of Christian theology and his rather conservative hesitancy to advocate change to its received doctrinal content may well be Marion's ambiguity, which was noted earlier, about the relationship between Dionysius and the modern and postmodern critique of religion and metaphysics. To the extent that he occasionally presents Christian apophatic theology as "claim[ing] to reach *in fine* what it deconstructs" and therefore "a serious rival," not an "unconscious forerunner," of deconstruction,<sup>84</sup> he might feel justified in promoting theology as a mere retrieval of traditional teaching. At the same time, the seriousness and the persistence of his engagement with Hölderlin and Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida suggests an awareness that theology learns in its dialogue with modernity and postmodernity as much as it has its own insight to contribute to that debate. It seems likely, then, that it will emerge with substantial changes not only to its basis but also to the way this basis is developed, expressed, and applied to a plethora of issues in today's world and in the lives of believers.

Apophatic theology in Marion's sense, as a radical critique of the conceptual idols that stand in the way of our loving attention to God and the neighbour, can never be accomplished by supplanting one theory by another,<sup>85</sup> but it must radically call into question any confidence to "possess" knowledge of things divine as it turns the whole of theology into a tentative and fallible discourse lacking stability and with no guarantee of success. Examples from ancient and modern, Christian and non-Christian thought abundantly demonstrate those risks, but also the promise of a truly liberating language permitting a real encounter with an other, human or divine.

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<sup>84</sup> Marion, "In the Name," 22.

<sup>85</sup> To that extent Marion's critique of more recent theologies of the Eucharist is justified – but not his blanket defence of the Tridentine formula: Marion, *God*, 162–181.

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# Mysterian Social Trinitarianism: Responding to Charges of Projection, Anthropomorphism, and Apophasis

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**Abstract:** The landscape of current trinitarian theology seems to be settling into three chief domains: Latin (or classical) trinitarianism, social trinitarianism, and apophatic (or mysterian) trinitarianism. In this article I look at three main objections to social trinitarianism. The first objection, voiced most forcefully by Karen Kilby, is that the social view follows a vicious pattern of projection. The second objection, related to the first, is raised on grounds of anthropomorphism. According to this objection, social trinitarians employ the notion of mutual love, a notion which raises big concerns among cotemporary Thomists. The third objection is grounded in the inability of humans to know much about the divine being, or for our language to make true statements about God. If we do not know about God's essence, then social trinitarians do not know most (or all) of what they claim to know. This line of thinking is very recently proposed by Katherine Sonderegger. I detail the main contours of each of the three objections and argue that none of them are strong enough to warrant the rejection of social trinitarianism. However, if apophaticism ultimately forces trinitarians to reject the social theory, there is still some room for a mysterian social trinitarianism. I outline the contours of such a view and explain its motivations and limits.

**Keywords:** social trinitarianism, apophaticism, anthropomorphism, mysterianism, mutual love, Richard of St Victor

The landscape of current trinitarian theology seems to be settling into three chief domains: Latin trinitarianism, social trinitarianism, and apophatic trinitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Social trinitarianism arose largely due to perceived weaknesses of Latin views, while apophasis seems to be gaining traction largely in reaction to perceived weakness of social views. The concerted attack on social trinitarianism in recent decades leads Sarah Coakley to tentatively declare that “the era of ‘social trinitarianism’ is now over.”<sup>2</sup>

In this article I consider three reasons for rejecting social trinitarianism that are common or well-represented in recent literature. Each objection is firmly grounded in considerations about the limits of human knowledge and language regarding God's (triune) being. In this way, each objection is apophatically motivated. The first

<sup>1</sup> There are other important trinitarian views. For instance, relative identity is a metaphysical theory applied with increasing acuity among philosophically inclined trinitarians; Monarchical trinitarianism, from the Eastern tradition, may be poised to be enter the discussion in a serious way. See van Inwagen, “And Yet They Are Not Three Gods,” 217–248; Branson, “One God,” 6–58.

<sup>2</sup> Coakley, “Beyond Understanding,” 399.

reason is raised most forcefully by Karen Kilby. Kilby argues that social trinitarians project human qualities onto God, do so necessarily as part of the nature of their view, and that this projection is especially problematic.<sup>3</sup> The second reason to reject social trinitarianism is on the grounds of an odious anthropomorphism. According to an impressive lineage of twentieth and twenty-first century Thomist thinkers, the notion of mutual love is at the heart of social trinitarianism. However, mutual love is too creaturely a characteristic to properly attribute to God. Trinitarian mutual love must be rejected. And since social trinitarianism takes mutual love as a core feature, it too must be abandoned.

A third reason for rejecting social views of the Trinity is apophasis. Social trinitarianism is chiefly an explanatory project, seeking to make true statements about the divine life. Apophasis, however, holds that our God-talk ultimately fails. If we have good reason for approaching trinitarian theology apophatically, then we also have good reason for rejecting social trinitarianism.

I begin by articulating the difference between a ‘theory’ and a ‘model’ in theology – a distinction which clarifies and advances our discussion, but which is not always made by theologians. I then detail the three common objections to social trinitarianism just mentioned, responding to them each in turn. I argue that none of the three reasons offered are good enough for social trinitarians to reject their view. I close by reflecting especially on mysterian versions of social trinitarianism and the resources this type of view provides for responding to the apophatic turn in theology and the concomitant attack on social trinitarianism generally.

### Three Domains and Two Approaches to Trinitarian Theology

Before turning to the three objections, I want to make two clarificatory remarks to set up the main discussion. First, there are various understandings of Latin, social, and apophatic trinitarianism. For clarity, I will briefly detail what I take to be the key characteristics of each domain that are most pertinent to this article.

Latin (or ‘classical’) trinitarianism is characterized by its commitment to numerical oneness of divine will and intellect. There are not three subjects or centres of consciousness; not three ‘I’s who can each stand in an I-Thou relationship with each other. Rather, the single divine substance can be correctly viewed as a single agent distinguished internally by relations of origin. In contrast, Social trinitarianism (or ‘ST’ for short) is characterised primarily by its commitment to multiple divine subjects, or persons. The term ‘person’ is crucial for ST because, according to the view, our concept of personhood correctly applies (even if distantly and analogously) to

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<sup>3</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis,” 432–445.



the divine threeness. Each divine person is a subject or centre of consciousness and will; each person stands in an I-thou relationship with each other person.

Finally, apophatic (what I will call ‘mysterian’<sup>4</sup>) trinitarianism is marked by its commitment to the claim that humans are ignorant of God’s essence, particularly his triunity. A key characteristic on which mysterians take a stance is the extent of human ignorance. Apophasis comes in degrees, and the strongest form says that humans know nothing or next to nothing about God’s essence and that human language fails to transmit (much) truth about the Trinity. I will call this ‘complete mysterianism,’ and very few thinkers hold this view. An attenuated mysterianism says that humans are granted some limited knowledge of God’s essence, that our language latches onto God’s nature (even if obliquely), and that our concepts give us some insight or illumination (however dim).<sup>5</sup>

The second remark I want to make is about two related notions that are critical for doing trinitarian theology but which are often overlooked by theologians. These are notions of *theory* and *model*.<sup>6</sup> These notions are distinguished from one another by the *amount of information* each conveys, by the *level of insight* each wants to achieve, and by the *goals* or contribution each tries to make in trinitarian theology. Let me say a little more about each notion.

A trinitarian theory conveys a significant amount of information, with the goal of accurately describing God’s triune nature, yielding insight into that nature. In trinitarian theology theories are often presented in the form of doctrinal statements. Take for example the Athanasian Creed. Whencever its origins and whatever its authority, all parties relevant to the present discussion take it to be a statement of doctrine. The first half of the creed, in particular, constructs highly detailed descriptions of divine triunity that are meant to be received as veridical, and it does this for the education all believers.<sup>7</sup>

4 Scholars often use ‘apophaticism’ and ‘negative theology’ more or less interchangeably. However, negative theology is a metaphysical project which attempts to make true statements about what God is not like. Apophaticism is an epistemic thesis about the inadequacy of language to make any accurate statements about God (whether positive or negative). Borrowing from Oliver D. Crisp (*Analyzing Doctrine*, 77–100), I will use ‘mysterianism’ to reflect any thesis about the human inability to know or speak of – to some degree – the divine being.

5 Another issue, not central to our discussion, is the *cause* of our ignorance. Humans may be ignorant of God because it is the nature of God to be unknowable; this is an ontological statement. Alternatively, humans may be ignorant of God because we simply lack the cognitive equipment, or our equipment does not operate properly until, say, the beatific vision; this is an epistemic question.

6 A third important notion is that of *analogy*. Analogy plays a major role in traditional trinitarian theology, such as the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Thomas. However, what today is often referred to as ‘the social analogy’ is actually a theory, sometimes offered with a model of some aspect of the theory. Due to space and emphasis, this paper puts analogy to the side, directing its attention to theories and, secondarily, models.

7 Caesarius, bishop of Arles writes in the first half of the sixth-century: “Because it is necessary, and very much so, that not only the clergy but also the laity know the Catholic faith well, we have especially written what the holy Fathers have defined as the Catholic faith. This we should both read frequently ourselves and impress upon others.” Caesarius then states the Athanasian creed. Caesarius Arelatensis, *Sermo* 2 (FC 31, 25).

A model is a simplified description of some aspect of a theory. A model sharpens focus, directs attention, highlights a part of a theory for special consideration. A theologian may employ a model for several reasons. One primary use of models in trinitarian theology is to show how some claim or group of claims in a theory might be possible. For example, social trinitarians claim that the three divine agents are one God, and not three. To show how this claim might be possible, a social trinitarian may construct a model which deploys the notion of perichoresis. This model is meant to show how the divine persons *could* be sufficiently united, though the model does not commit the social trinitarian to the claim that they actually *are* united in such a way. Thus, models are much more modest than theories. In the hypothetical perichoresis case, if the model is a good one then it successfully shows how the three divine persons can be considered one God, allowing the social trinitarian to maintain investments in the Athanasian creed (which is a theory) and in the social intuition that each divine person has a numerically distinct psychology (will, intellect, affect).<sup>8</sup>

By distinguishing between model and theory in trinitarian theology we are situated to see the target of recent critique in sharper focus. Theories, and not models, are the apparatus by which theologians (and philosophers) seek to make truth statements about the divine being. Therefore theories, expressed as doctrinal statements, are the real subject of debate. In the remainder of this essay I will set aside the more moderate claims expressed by social *models* and direct my attention to three reasons offered for rejecting social trinitarian *theories*.

## Reason 1: Social Trinitarian Projections

The first and probably most popular objection we will consider is that of projection. ST, so the critique goes, commits a particularly vicious form of projection which dooms the project. This critique is developed by Karen Kilby in one of the most cited articles in modern trinitarian theology.<sup>9</sup> There Kilby outlines three theological steps social trinitarians take and she argues that each step is more problematic than the previous. Let us review those steps in summary.

According to Kilby, social trinitarians begin by viewing God as very much like humans. Crucially, ST tends to view divine persons as centres of consciousness, will, intellect, and action.<sup>10</sup> Some social trinitarians attempt to avoid importing modern,

<sup>8</sup> One representative example is Peter van Inwagen, who offers a model to show how certain claims in the doctrine of the Trinity are possibly coherent. Van Inwagen ("And Yet They Are Not Three Gods," 221) is quite explicit that his model is meant to show the logical coherence of Trinitarian doctrine, but not meant to replace or supplement that doctrine.

<sup>9</sup> Kilby, "Perichoresis," 432–445. The article is recently republished in Kilby's, *God, Evil*.

<sup>10</sup> This is a major point of critique from non-social trinitarians. See Coakley, "Persons," 123–144.

individualistic understandings of personhood into their concept of divine persons, and some make no such attempt. Either way, ST projects human qualities of personhood onto God. Such projection goes too far, perhaps even motivating the conclusion that there exist three distinct divine substances.<sup>11</sup> This is the first round of projection in which ST participates, and Kilby cites as examples Leonardo Boff and John D. Zizioulas, among others.<sup>12</sup>

In the next round of projection ST looks to certain unifying features from human experience to explain the unity of divine persons (i.e., how God is one). Love, giving, communication, and other relationships that we find in human communities are all offered as answers to the question *What makes the three divine persons one God?* Different social trinitarians offer different combinations of characteristics (though all, to my knowledge, include love). Whatever characteristics they include, social trinitarians then call these unifying relations ‘perichoresis.’ Kilby takes Jürgen Moltmann and Cornelius Plantinga as practitioners of this type of projection.<sup>13</sup>

For critics, what makes this second round of projection particularly damaging is that ST *must* engage in it. Says Kilby: “it is not just that as it happens social theories of the Trinity often project our ideals onto God. Rather it is built into the kind of project that most social theorists are involved in that they *have to be* projectionist.”<sup>14</sup> Having drawn from human sociology to build its concept of divine persons, ST has no other conceptual pool from which to draw in explaining divine oneness. In effect, ST must double down on its initial projection with another round of projection.

With a theory of divine persons and divine unity patterned after human societies, ST makes a final projection. Where the first two projections were from human experience to the divine life, the third round of projection moves in the opposite direction, from the divine life to human experience. ST views God as a community of perfect persons, united (and so one God) by their love (sharing, etc.). Since the divine community is perfect, social trinitarians are keen to apply their concept of God to human communities. ST uses its doctrine of the Trinity to make normative claims about human societies, such as ecclesial structure and hierarchy, as well as secular government.<sup>15</sup> According to the critics, the problem with such theological application is that ST is just projecting *back onto* humans what ST originally *took from* humans

<sup>11</sup> In an early article Richard Swinburne (“Could There Be More Than One God?,” 225–241) discusses three divine substances along with talk about three divine individuals. For this he has been critiqued, e.g., Feser, “Swinburne’s Tritheism,” 175–184. Such critique may be unfair since Swinburne looks to be using substance in a highly qualified way. On this see van Inwagen – Howard-Snyder, “Trinity. 2. Swinburne’s Theory.” Swinburne has since made clear his commitment to a single divine substance given a more traditional understanding of substance.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Boff, *Trinity*; Zizioulas, *Being*.

<sup>13</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity*; Plantinga Jr, “Social Trinity,” 21–47.

<sup>14</sup> Kilby, “Perichoresis,” 441.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom* is probably the most famous example. See also Boff, *Trinity*.

and projected on God. Kilby points to Colin E. Gunton and Patricia Wilson-Kastner as examples of the third projection.<sup>16</sup>

The third round of projection makes the whole project of ST a tidy example of vicious circularity. This circularity is a theoretical or explanatory vice. Social trinitarians also engages in the moral and theological vice of hubris when they claim to know so much about God's nature. Thus, ST engages in a double idolatry by building a false god in humanity's image and then worships that god by trying to imitate him. For all these reasons, ST is repugnant and ought to be abandoned.

## Responding to the Projection Critique

Let us briefly take stock. Kilby has given us three problems with ST that are all centred around projection. Summarized, they are:

(Projection 1) ST projects human characteristics onto God by viewing the divine hypostases as individual centres of consciousness.

(Projection 2) ST projects human characteristics onto the divine persons by explaining their unity (i.e. God's oneness) in terms of interpersonal relationships (such as love, sharing, empathy, etc.); further, ST *necessarily* does this.

(Projection 3) ST projects human characteristics back onto humans by using the social theory as a standard for human relationships.

Obviously, the common theme among these purported difficulties is the method of projecting human qualities onto God, or re-projecting them onto humans. Taken individually, any of (1)–(3) pose a difficulty for ST. To Kilby and others, though, these problems form a sort of package deal: when viewed together they provide (more than) sufficient grounds for rejecting ST.

I will consider the three projection objections in a moment, arguing that none of them are so fatal to ST as Kilby claims. Before that, though, it is important to make a general point: Kilby claims that the three types of projections are not only fatal to ST but, as we saw, are also *essential* to it. Kilby takes aim at social trinitarians including Moltmann, Plantinga, Gunton, and others. However, her claim is too sweeping since, as Miroslav Volf puts it, social trinitarians are “a diverse group of theologians,” and the “differences among [them] are vast.”<sup>17</sup> The upshot is that there are many variations of ST, and not all are subject to the three projections. For instance, Volf's version of ST wants to maintain Gregory of Nyssa's claim that the Father, Son, and

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson-Kastner, *Faith*; Gunton, *The One*.

<sup>17</sup> Volf, “Aphatic Social Trinitarianism,” 408.

Spirit share a single will.<sup>18</sup> Though they do not apply equally to all versions of ST, Kilby's objections are cited frequently enough to warrant point-by-point consideration, to which we now turn.

*Projection 1:* One place ST goes wrong, we are told, is in its initial round of projection. That is, ST projects human characteristics onto God by viewing the divine hypostases as individual centres of consciousness. But why think that such projection is detrimental to ST?

In one place Kilby hints at the historical gap between ST's understanding of 'person' and the understanding in traditional trinitarian theology. Viewing a divine person as having a numerically distinct thought life (i.e., will or intellect) directly contradicts traditional instruction on the matter. This is a critique Sara Coakley further elaborates upon elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> But recent scholarship shows that there was no consensus on the matter among important patristic thinkers. For example, it is commonplace to hear of 'the Cappadocian view' that there is a single intellect and will had by all three divine hypostases. But the claim is too sweeping to be correct, as a little probing shows. Consider Gregory of Nazianzus' teaching, "each one is God if contemplated alone, with the intellect dividing undivided entities; the three are contemplated as one God through their identity of movement and nature, when apprehended with each other."<sup>20</sup>

Here Gregory speaks of three intellects discrete to each divine person (though with an 'identity' of action and essence). Oliver B. Langworthy comments that Gregory's commitment to three divine intellects "has often been obfuscated due to a misunderstanding of Gregory's view of divine causality or a misappropriation of Nyssen or Basil's views into a Cappadocian whole."<sup>21</sup> That is, the Nazianzen's commitment to three distinct intellects is often overlooked. But a more thorough investigation reveals a complex picture of classical trinitarian thought regarding the nature of personhood.<sup>22</sup> The upshot is that there is historical precedent for key elements of the ST understanding of personhood.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 2.15. In tension with numerically one divine will, Miroslav Volf ("Apophatic Social Trinitarianism," 409) also holds that the three persons are distinct agents, each acting inseparably in any divine activity.

<sup>19</sup> Coakley, "Persons," 123–144.

<sup>20</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 23.11 (Harrison, 17).

<sup>21</sup> Langworthy, *Soteriological Pneumatology*, 19–20.

<sup>22</sup> For a place to start, see Williams, "Persons," 52–84, esp. 57–61.

<sup>23</sup> According to Timothy Paul, the seven ecumenical councils are silent regarding relationship of the will(s) to the divine essence. However, Scott Williams ("Discovery," 332–362) argues that the sixth council (Constantinople III) explicitly posits a single divine will and intellect. Pawl, "Conciliar Trinitarianism," 106–107.

Kilby critiques ST by detailing another projection: the many disparate, often contradictory, conclusions social trinitarians draw from their view of personhood.<sup>24</sup> But this critique makes for a poor objection to ST. Drawing incorrect conclusions from a theory does not entail that the theory itself is incorrect. At worst it means only that some of the conclusions and applications which social trinitarians draw from their theory should be rejected. We cannot judge the *truth* of the theory from the *applications* by some of its proponents. To do so is to commit the association fallacy, on which ST is found guilty by being associated with faulty praxis. When a theory is poorly applied or used to support a bad inference, the solution is not to reject the theory, but rather to reject the bad conclusion and applications. The application of social theory may give reasons to reject some of those applications – perhaps even *all* application. However, the application of ST does not provide any solid grounds for rejecting ST as a theory.

It seems that for Kilby, the real problem with ST's initial round of projection is what plagues social and classical trinitarianism generally: its advocates just claim to know too much about God's inner life. This is a problem because Kilby believes that humans simply cannot know all that social and classical trinitarians claim to know about the divine being.<sup>25</sup> Further, Kilby identifies several vices associated with such knowledge claims: a pernicious brand of hubris, a trinitarian instance of elitism/Gnosticism, and even idolatry.<sup>26</sup> Put roughly, ST leads to pride, lack of love for our brethren, and constructing a false view of God. By her lights the best way to fight against these evils is to adopt apophatic trinitarianism.<sup>27</sup> In response to Kilby's charges, some have pointed out that the best way to maintain a humble charity is not to adopt apophasis, but rather do what the best of trinitarian theology has always called for: prayerfully seek knowledge *of* God (however limited) *from* God's revelation and illumination *through* the Spirit, all for the sake of Christ and His church.<sup>28</sup>

*Projection 2:* In the second round of projection, ST explains the unity of the divine persons in terms of human interpersonal relationships (such as love, sharing, empathy, etc.). Kilby argues that social trinitarians necessarily draw from human unity to explain divine unity. But looking more closely, we find that perichoresis is not an essential element of ST's explanation of divine oneness, and thus ST is not dependent on mutual love (or sharing, etc) in the way Kilby describes. Instead, to ground God's oneness, social trinitarians are able to look to traditional answers such as numerically

24 Kilby, "Perichoresis," 439–440.

25 Kilby, "Perichoresis," 443–444. In a later paper ("Aquinas," 414–427) Kilby reads Aquinas as endorsing a fairly austere apophasis. This insight is developed further in Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 65–77.

26 Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 76–77.

27 Kilby, "Apophatic Trinitarianism," 75–76.

28 For a response along these lines see Levering, "Friendship," 39–54.

one substance and divine simplicity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, social trinitarians may even opt for a high degree of mysterianism about the divine oneness. For example, a social trinitarian may commit to the following: we do *not* know what explains the unity of the divine persons (i.e. why those three are one God); we *do* know that those three are each a centre of consciousness and together are (somehow) one God. While mysterianism like this cuts across the grain of some ST sensibilities, there is no obvious incompatibility with ST's fundamental commitment to three centres of consciousness. In sum: however social trinitarians opt to explain the divine unity, or if they believe they can explain it at all, they do not *necessarily* project human types of social unity onto God.

*Projection 3:* Finally, the projection critique avers that ST uses the social theory as a standard for human relationships. ST draws from human relationships to build the social theory in the first place, making this third round of projection viciously circular. Much like our response to projection 2, we may here point out that not all social trinitarians use their doctrine of the trinity as a social agenda. Nothing about ST demands that its adherents use it as a datum for further theologizing. For this reason some social theorists may be happy to grant one of Kilby's big ideas, namely, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a useful doctrine as such. It probably goes too far to claim that all application of trinitarian doctrine is off limits for application. It certainly goes too far to claim that all such application is idolatry.

To conclude this section, one of Kilby's overarching claims is that we know far less about the divine life than we often think we know. This is a point trinitarians of all stripes would do well in taking to heart. Recall that ST is a theory, an explanation of trinitarian doctrine meant to give us understanding (however limited and analogical) of God's triunity. It may be the case that social theorists must re-envision the limits of the explanation and application of their theory. ST may be far less useful than many social theorists currently recognize. Even so, nothing about ST demands or relies on its usefulness. We may critique some specific social theorist for going too far in her application of ST. But ST itself remains unscathed. Indeed, nothing about ST demands that it be applied at all. Kilby has given social trinitarians some suggestive critiques on which to meditate. Even so, the projection critique fails as a reason to reject ST.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, William Lane Craig's trinitarianism explains the divine persons as comparable to a single substance endowed with three distinct intellects. Thomas H. McCall defends the compatibility and close connection of divine simplicity with trinitarianism. Moreland – Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 575–596; McCall, "Trinity," 42–59.

## Reason 2: The Anthropomorphism of Mutual Love

The second critique of ST that we will consider is directed at anthropomorphism. Reason 2 is like reason 1 in some general respects since they both object to predicating human qualities of God's essence.<sup>30</sup> Reason 1, the projection critique, focused on the arrogance and idolatry of ST's projections. Reason 2, the anthropomorphism critique, focuses on the notion of intratrinitarian mutual love, a common – to my knowledge, universal – notion deployed by social trinitarians. Proponents of the anthropomorphism critique argue that mutual love is too anthropomorphic to be correctly applied to God. Therefore, mutual love should be abandoned. Since mutual love is essential to ST, we have good reason to reject ST.

Some thinkers who use mutual love in their trinitarian thought include Cornelius Plantinga,<sup>31</sup> Richard Swinburne,<sup>32</sup> William Lane Craig,<sup>33</sup> and Thomas H. McCall.<sup>34</sup> Tying all these thinkers together as a common source is the twelfth-century theologian Richard of St. Victor, whose most pertinent reflections on love are expressed in his *De Trinitate*.<sup>35</sup> There he uses the notion of mutual love to argue for the necessary existence of three divine persons, and to argue against the possibility for four (or more) persons. Mutual love, then, is critical to Richard's trinitarian project. The notion of mutual love is also the primary target of sustained attack coming from several fronts.

The anthropomorphism critique is voiced by some mysterians, such as Katherine Sonderegger. In her systematic theology she speaks against 'relationalism' and 'object centered' views of love.<sup>36</sup> Richard of St. Victor, as representative of the Victorine teaching on love, is singled out for encroaching on divine oneness and unicity by suggesting plurality of divine subjects.<sup>37</sup> Sonderegger clearly thinks that mutual love goes too far in its anthropomorphizing of God, and other mysterians have voiced like concerns.<sup>38</sup> But the loudest and by far most sophisticated criticism comes from Thomists over the past one hundred years or so.

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<sup>30</sup> On their face both 'projection' and 'anthropomorphism' apparently refer to the same type of activity, viz., predicating human characteristics of God. Whatever the exact relationship of the two ideas, they overlap in the responses they garner from critics. For instance, Sonderegger's rejection (*Systematic Theology*, 485) of Richard of St. Victor and his use of mutual love seems to have direct bearing on her rejection of ST and her attraction to mysterianism.

<sup>31</sup> Plantinga, *Social Trinity and Trinitarianism*, 29–30, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 170–191.

<sup>33</sup> Moreland – Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 594–595.

<sup>34</sup> McCall, *Which Trinity?*, 204–206.

<sup>35</sup> Book 3 of Richard's *De Trinitate* is the *locus classicus* of this theme. For studies on Richard's notion of love see Cacciapuoti, *Deus existentia amoris*; Dumeige, *Richard de Saint-Victor*.

<sup>36</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 477, 481.

<sup>37</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, 476, 483.

<sup>38</sup> Holmes, *The Holy Trinity* (Published in North America under the title *The Quest for the Trinity*), 152–153. Kilby does not cite Richard directly, but does raise concerns about mutual love. Kilby, "Perichoresis," 433–438.



A sustained attack on the notion of mutual love began in earnest early in the twentieth-century. Theologian Maurílio Teixeira-Leite Penido argued that Aquinas' most mature writings view the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and Son. Penido's polemical thought ignited a debate among Thomists about the Spirit's relationship to the Father and Son, a debate on which major Thomas scholars continue to weigh-in even today (we will hear from some in a moment).

Pertinent to our discussion is Penido's acute criticism of mutual love as applied to God's being. The grandfather of this theological error, says Penido, is Richard of St. Victor, whose "attempt to transpose friendship into God is to be ranked among the most complete examples of theological anthropomorphism."<sup>39</sup> Given Richard's commitments to a single divine substance, numerically one divine will (and intellect and power), and to a strong view of simplicity, we can only imagine how Penido would have reacted to contemporary social trinitarianism. That is, Penido's objections to mutual love, and the objections of those who follow him, would apply even more strongly to contemporary ST. Therefore a survey of some of the main voices of this critique is warranted.

Penido first objects to Richard's unfounded distinction between divine self-love and divine other-love. Self-love (or 'private love,' in Penido's words) is "selfish (*égoïste*), withdrawn, miserly with its gifts."<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, other-love (what Penido calls 'friendship') is "free, disinterested, generous."<sup>41</sup> Penido's second objection is to Richard's argument that God has a "need for a friendly sharing (*un partage amical*) to have the plenitude of happiness." In sum, Richard first distinguishes between God's self-love and other-love, and Richard then posits God's need for friendship to be perfectly happy. Both points are "very true when it comes to humans," Penido concedes, "but precisely too human to be transposed into God!" More specifically, Richard's notion of mutual love (i) defines self-love in such a way that God cannot love himself, and (ii) views God as having "poverty," or need for friendship to be completely satisfied. In response Penido points out that God does love himself, does have self-love. Further, the divine superabundance of goodness and happiness excludes the possibility of need or lack or poverty. Therefore, both (i) and (ii) fail, taking the notion of mutual love with it.

Several notable Thomists follow Penido's critiques of mutual love, and through these thinkers the negative stance on mutual love is disseminated. Let us quickly survey a few key thinkers. Hyacinthe-François Dondaine teaches that Thomas assiduously distances himself from mutual love, thereby avoiding "the danger of anthropomorphism and those inequalities and oppositions which cause Richard's disciples to

<sup>39</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 67. Penido states that his theological task will be complete only when Christians stop attributing mutual love to God.

<sup>40</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 49.

<sup>41</sup> Penido, "Gloses," 49.

stumble.”<sup>42</sup> ‘Inequality’ and ‘opposition’ are references to Richard’s analysis of mutual love. We know from human experience, says Richard, that other-love is either freely given (“gratuitous”) or it is required (“owed”).<sup>43</sup> On this analysis, the Father’s love is purely given (to Son and Spirit), the Son requites the Father’s love and joins him in giving love to the Spirit, and the Spirit’s love is purely required (to the Father and Son). To Dondaine’s mind, by applying this analysis of love Richard opposes the divine persons to one another and even creates a hierarchy among them.

Yves Congar in his magisterial *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* points out the “danger of anthropomorphism” that occurs when “our mode of being is projected as it is” upon God’s being.<sup>44</sup> That is, an unacceptable anthropomorphism occurs when “Human interpersonal experience is transferred to God without being subjected to a necessary and purifying process of criticism,” and it is not always clear that those who employ mutual love make the necessary purification.<sup>45</sup> In the twenty-first-century Jean-Pierre Torrell warns: “The deep beauty of [Richard’s] vision of things explains the seductive power that it has exercised and continues to exercise over minds.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas was initially attracted to the beauty of Richard’s vision, but came to recognize “the risk of anthropomorphism,” and so “little by little” Thomas gravitated “toward another explanation,” namely, the psychological analogy.<sup>47</sup>

In recent work Gilles Emery similarly explains how Thomas “cuts out” Richard’s anthropomorphisms of gratuitous and owed love. Though he does not detail why he thinks so, Emery makes clear that Richard’s distinction “applies to human beings but not to divine persons.”<sup>48</sup> But love that is freely given and love that is required are the essence of mutual love. If these expressions of love are too anthropomorphic to apply to God, then so too is the notion of mutual love.

### Responding to the Anthropomorphism Critique

Sonderegger, Stephen R. Holmes, and a slew of well-respected Thomists object to mutual love on the grounds that it is too human a notion to be aptly predicated of God. These thinkers conclude that mutual love is a faulty theological notion and ought to be rejected when doing trinitarian theology. However, since mutual love is at the heart of ST, this means that the social theory must also be abandoned. How may a social trinitarian respond to objections to mutual love?

42 Dondaine, “Saint Thomas,” 387–409.

43 These are the notions of *amor gratuitus* and *amor debitus*.

44 Congar, *I Believe*, 92.

45 Congar, *I Believe*, 92.

46 Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 184–185.

47 Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 185.

48 Emery, *The Trinitarian*, 234.

An initial option would be to question the Thomist reading of Richard of St. Victor. Recall that Penido finds Richard making a distinction between egoistical self-love and altruistic other-love. Characterizing love this way means that Richard (i) denies that God has self-love, and instead (ii) concludes that God has a need for other-love. And yet one searches in vain to locate any hint of either claim in Richard's work. Indeed, on Richard's view, God's self-love is critical as it is the source and measure of his love for others.<sup>49</sup> Further, Richard makes it clear that God has no needs because God is maximally good: it is impossible for God to gain any good thing God does not already have and thus it is impossible for God to become any more good or more happy. Indeed, God's maximal goodness is the ground of Richard's entire trinitarian argument: the Father extends his love and being to the Son and the Spirit exactly *because* of his superabundant goodness and joy. Whatever mutual love's problems, if any there be, they are not where Penido locates them.

Another response to Thomist critics would be to question their reading of Thomas. Time and again we are told that Thomas rejects the notion of mutual love, that he purifies his analogical reasoning of Richard's anthropomorphism, that he successfully comes to reject mutual love's flirtation with tritheism. Less often are we told *where*, exactly, Thomas takes this stance. At one point in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas does reject the idea that a person must share his good with another to have the fullness of happiness. Aquinas explains, "Similarly it is said that 'without fellowship there is not able to be joyful possession of any good thing,' a saying apt when a person does not have perfect goodness, and therefore needs to share someone else's good so that he can have the fullness of joy."<sup>50</sup>

In his very recent monograph on the Trinity, Thomas Joseph White cites this as the place where Aquinas identifies and rejects Richard's anthropomorphism.<sup>51</sup> Two points must be made about this passage. First, the principle quoted comes from one of Seneca's letter to Lucilius<sup>52</sup>, and this principle is not deployed by Richard (though Bonaventure does use it in his own trinitarian thought<sup>53</sup>). Thus, even if Aquinas' critique of the principle is sound, it is not a critique that applies to Richard's trinitarian thought.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See den Bok, *Communicating the Most High*, 291.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2. [*Similiter etiam quod dicitur, quod sine consortio non potest esse iucunda possessio alicuius boni, locum habet quando in una persona non invenitur perfecta bonitas; unde indiget, ad plenam iucunditatis bonitatem, bono alicuius alterius consociate sibi; my own translation*].

<sup>51</sup> White, *The Trinity*, 364.

<sup>52</sup> Seneca (*Ep.* 6 [LCL 75, 27]) writes, "Nothing will ever please me, no matter how excellent or beneficial, if I must retain the knowledge of it to myself ... No good thing is pleasant to possess, without friends to share it."

<sup>53</sup> Bonaventura, *I Sent.* d. II, q. 2, fund. 1. For more on Bonaventure's argument for the Trinity from the notion of jocundity, see Bray, "Bonaventure's I Sentence," 617–650.

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that Seneca's principle may plausibly be read in ways that do not imply lack or need. Indeed, Aristotle (*Eth. nic.* 9.9) argues that even for a perfect man, friendship is necessary for happiness.

Second, Richard does not argue that a divine person must share his goods with another to have the fullness of joy – as if the Father lacks some joy until he generates the Son. Instead, Richard argues that a divine person is already perfect, and so already has the fullness of joy. From this datum Richard yields an insight: the fullness of joy lacks nothing which is most joyful, most pleasing; and nothing is more pleasing or joyful than mutual love. In this way Richard argues from the fullness of divine joy to the existence of three divine persons; he does not reason from the need (or lack, or poverty) of a divine person, which then requires some other person to prevent that lack. The difference between Richard’s argument and Thomas’ critique is subtle, but crucial. For when critics of mutual love specify Richard’s anthropomorphism, we find that the anthropomorphism does not belong to Richard in any way.

So far I have sought to give a brief sketch of how Richard avoids the Thomist critique of anthropomorphism. Just as importantly, we also find that Thomas himself does not reject the notion of mutual love. Instead, Thomas explicitly accepts the social analogy as one of a handful of sound options for bringing insight into trinitarian doctrine.<sup>55</sup> Remarkably, in one of Thomas’ later works we also find him openly accepting Richard’s analysis of gratuitous and owed love when applied to divinity.<sup>56</sup>

We have seen that neither Richard nor Thomas give very much help to critics of mutual love. A close reading of Richard reveals a careful application of the mutual love analogy and, ultimately, a rather conservative theology of the tripersonal substance. A close reading of Thomas reveals a general acceptance of Richard’s core insights, though relegating them to a third tier of importance. But appealing to authorities cannot provide a decisive defence of mutual love any more than it can provide a decisive critique. Whatever the authorities say, it is the notion of mutual love itself which must be analysed.

This leads to the third response, in which we find that it is very difficult to articulate a principle that excludes mutual love but does not simultaneously exclude other trinitarian analogies. The objector’s task, then, is (i) to *distinguish* permissible from impermissible anthropomorphisms, and (ii) *explain* why a proposed anthropomorphism is permissible or not. We may begin a response by asking, What,

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55 “But from this fact that the Father and Son mutually love each other, it follows that mutual love, who is the Holy Spirit, proceeds from both.” Thomas Aquinas, *STh* 1, q. 37, a.1 [*Sed ex hoc ipso quod pater et filius se mutuo amant, oportet quod mutuus amor, qui est spiritus sanctus, ab utroque procedat*; my own translation]. Thomas clearly holds that mutual love is tertiary in importance compared with the Augustinian psychological analogy and with the analogy of the Spirit as the bond of love. That is, Richard’s analogy does no work that the psychological analogy does not already do and do better. In sum, mutual love is not a *bad* analogy, it is a superfluous one.

56 “Richard of St Victor, however, distinguishes between due and gratuitous love: but by gratuitous love he means love not received from another, and by due love, that which is received from another. In this sense there is nothing to hinder the same love from being gratuitous as the Father’s, and due as the Son’s: since it is the same love whereby the Father loves and whereby the Son loves: yet this love the Son has from the Father, but the Father from none.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae*, q. 10, a. 4, r. 8).

precisely, about mutual love makes it too anthropomorphic for proper theological use? What principle might Thomists, and others, use to argue that mutual love ought to be rejected?

Dondaine points us towards such a principle when he highlights the “inequalities and oppositions” among the divine persons that mutual love involves.<sup>57</sup> If trinitarian mutual love requires the divine persons to be subordinated or improperly opposed to one another, then we have excellent reason to reject it. Yet mutual love involves no such opposition or subordination among divine persons. For example, the Father’s love for the Son is total gift (*amor gratuitus*) while the Son’s love for his Father is totally requited (*amor debitus*). The opposition here is one of modes of love, and is quite comparable to the modes of being on a processions analysis: the Father proceeds from no one, the Son proceeds from the Father. On such a conception the Father is identical to his mode of procession or relation to the Son, and on Richard’s similar analysis of mutual love the Father is identical to his mode of loving the Son. Just as the notion of processions includes no vicious opposition, neither does the notion of mutual love.

Likewise, mutual love includes no subordination since the Father’s personal property is to love with gratuitous love (the Father *is* his love for the Son and Spirit). Since the Father shares the entirety of the divine substance with the Son and Spirit in his act of love, Son and Spirit are equally powerful as the Father, equally wise, equally God. Mutual love generates no repugnant subordination. Dondaine’s principle gives us no reason to reject mutual love as a trinitarian concept.

Congar details one plausible principle when he explains that human relations cannot be projected onto God ‘as they are,’ but rather must first undergo a purifying process. According to Congar the purification process is one where all evil, imperfection, and lack are removed from a concept before it may be applied to the divine being. For example, God’s mutual love cannot come from a neediness, it cannot be prone to failure, it cannot be manipulative.<sup>58</sup> The social trinitarian agrees with Congar on all points: mutual love cannot be attributed to God ‘as is,’ but must be done so analogically, retaining the biblical imagery, and perhaps even through a process of perfect being (or perfect attribute) theology. Congar’s principle poses no real difficulty for ST and is not a good reason to reject ST.<sup>59</sup>

Gilles Emery suggests a final possible principle for rejecting mutual love. Emery explains that Thomas’ central concerns when developing his trinitarian theology were to avoid modalism and subordinationism/tritheism.<sup>60</sup> While avoiding these

<sup>57</sup> Dondaine, “Saint Thomas,” 387.

<sup>58</sup> Examples like these are precisely what Keith Ward (*Christ and the Cosmos*, 179) believes God’s love must be like: if God can be said to be loving at all, then God’s love must be like human love in such ways.

<sup>59</sup> For all his critiques of mutual love in its impure (or human) form, Congar (*I Believe*, 92) ultimately accepts it as an apt analogy after being suitably purified.

<sup>60</sup> Emery, *The Trinitarian*, 55–57.

heresies Thomas also wants to provide *some* modicum of illumination into the content of the trinitarian faith. To do so Thomas uses analogies, primarily a modified version of Augustine's psychological analogy. Thomas prefers this analogy because it can demonstrate the distinction of three intellectual activities within a single substance. Therefore, the psychological analogy is the best analogy between the created order and the triune God. If we *were* to draw an anti-mutual love principle from Thomas' approach, it might be expressed as follows:

*(The polytheism principle)* if an analogue to the Trinity is drawn from human interpersonal relationships, then that analogy indicates polytheism and so ought to be abandoned.

Obviously this principle is too strong for Thomas, who does not abandon mutual love, as we have seen. Nevertheless, it may be that Thomas was too permissive. Perhaps he should not only have relegated mutual love to a subordinate explanatory role, but he should have rejected it as a possible theological tool altogether. In any event, if this principle were true it would successfully force us to reject mutual love. But to see why the principle is false, we need look no further than the trinitarian *analogia analogissima*: Father, Son, and Spirit. The concepts of Father and Son are drawn from human interpersonal relationships, and spirit/breath too is a human-based metaphor. If we must reject mutual love because of the polytheism principle, then so too must we reject father-son, and spirit talk. I take it as obvious that we should not reject language of father, son, and spirit. But this means that the polytheism principle is too strong. The problem for critics of mutual love is that there is no clear principle *whatsoever* that excludes mutual love while also including familiar notions (i.e. father-son), the psychological analogy, and other traditional trinitarian concepts. In short, mutual love is permissible for trinitarians of all stripes, and a social theorist is perfectly within her rights to use it.

### **Reason 3: Mysterianism Excludes Social Trinitarianism**

Earlier I briefly sketched two general classes of apophatic mysterianism. The first is a very strong, 'complete mysterianism.' On this view we can have neither knowledge nor insight into the divine triunity. Of all the thinkers mentioned in this essay, only Kilby holds to something like complete mysterianism. On her view, the doctrine of the Trinity gives us a grammar for correctly talking about God, but no knowledge of what we affirm when we confess those truths. Stated another way, a doctrine of the Trinity gives us a syntax without a semantics.

Others, such as Stephen R. Holmes, posits a moderately strong mysterianism on which we know that the doctrine of the Trinity is true but it does not give us much knowledge of God's essence. Sonderegger, and particularly Coakley, take a weaker stance by positing both (limited) knowledge *and* (limited) insight into God's triune being. Whatever the details of each thinker's mysterianism, and whatever their motivations, the common thread is a commitment to an austere positive trinitarianism: very few true statements can be made about God's triune nature, and those statements shed very little light onto that nature.

Even a moderately strong apophasis, then, generates a rather bleak future for ST (and for that matter, classical trinitarianism<sup>61</sup>). This because a social theory of the Trinity seeks to do more than present a trinitarian grammar with an empty semantics. That is, social theorists do not merely want to say true words about God, but they intend for those words to help us understand the God about whom we speak. Further, social theorists want to provide some understanding of God's threeness beyond mere numerical distinction. That is, they want to say more than God is three 'we-know-not-what.' Taking themselves to be on firm biblical ground, social theorists want to describe the divine three positively and intelligibly – even if highly analogically. In short, ST is an explanatory project; it is a *theory*. But mysterianism is a denial of explanation; it is a rejection of the theoretical endeavor.

### Responding to Mysterianism: Apophatic & Mysterian Social Trinitarianism

We can summarize the main implication of mysterianism for ST this way: if (strong or moderately strong) mysterianism is true, then ST must be abandoned. Where is the social theorist to go from here? There are several possible responses.

First, the social trinitarian may respond by pointing out that the main implication, just summarized, contains a big 'if.' True, mysterianism of various sorts is an important part of traditional trinitarian theology.<sup>62</sup> Further, mysterianism has received some studied attention as a theological method.<sup>63</sup> Finally, mysterianism is increasingly being adopted into trinitarian methodology, in part as a response to ST. Nevertheless, there is not yet anything close to a consensus on how an apophatic trinitarianism ought to look.<sup>64</sup> So whilst the social trinitarian might be willing to

<sup>61</sup> Though Latin/classical trinitarianism largely avoid the first two critiques, the third, mysterian, critique applies. A defence of classical conceptions is beyond the scope of this article, however.

<sup>62</sup> There is a large literature on the subject. For a very recent introduction, see Andrew Radde-Gallwitz's entry on the Cappadocians in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Apophatic Theology*, available here: <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:39197/>.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Jacobs, "The Ineffable," 158–176.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance Sarah Coakley's article ("Beyond Understanding," 398–406), and others, in the recent special issue of *Political Theology* on Kilby's *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*.

abandon her theory if mysterianism is true, it is not at all clear that she has been given a persuasive case for mysterianism.

Second, the social trinitarian may refer back to Volf's point that ST is a variegated field. Some versions of ST avoid the mysterian critique. For instance, Stephen T. Davis develops a "mysterian social trinitarianism" which is highly reserved in its positive theological statements. Davis admits, for example, that our words are at best "signposts or pointers" to the truth, and that all our analogies ultimately fail.<sup>65</sup> Thus Davis' brand of social trinitarianism is strongly apophatic, often opting for negative theological statements, and cognizant that our trinitarian language consistently reaches its limits ("we have no apt categories for explaining how God can be three-in-one").<sup>66</sup> Davis' mysterian trinitarianism, then, is not clearly subject to the mysterian objection.<sup>67</sup>

Second, let us suppose that a strong or moderately strong mysterianism *is* true after all. In this case, the social trinitarian may form an apophatic version of ST. What exactly must the apophatic social trinitarian abandon and what is she left with? As I touched on at the outset of this essay, ST is a theory and so is a descriptive and explanatory project: ST seeks to make true statements about God's triune nature and those statements are meant to give us insight into the meaning of God's self-revelation.<sup>68</sup> This explanatory project must be abandoned if strong apophaticism is true. In that case ST fails as a theory, that is, as a project which hopes to make veridical descriptive statements about God's nature and which hopes that those statements yield understanding. All this must be abandoned if strong apophaticism obtains. However, the fundamental intuition of ST need not be abandoned.

Recall the distinction between a theory and a model. The former describes and explains, the latter looks for possibility. If strong apophaticism is true, then the social trinitarian can still commit to the core claims of a doctrine of the Trinity, such as:

- (1) There is numerically one God.

And,

- (2) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are numerically three divine persons.

As orthodox trinitarians, social theorists affirm that these propositions are true. But given the truth of mysterianism, social theorists will recognize that we do not

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<sup>65</sup> Davis, "Perichoretic Monotheism," 36–37.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, *Logic*, 143.

<sup>67</sup> One trade-off, however, is that Davis' version of ST offers much less theoretical content than most other versions.

<sup>68</sup> A ST doctrine of the Trinity, much like its classical counterpart, seeks to illumine or contribute to our understanding of revelation. Minimally, revelation will include scripture, though here we need not commit to what other sources there are that provide knowledge of the Trinity.



know very much about what the propositions mean. Even so, social theorists know some of what the claims do *not* mean: they do not mean that the single divine substance is some fourth thing in addition to the three persons. We also know that the divine persons (whatever ‘person’ means) are not identical to one another (i.e., there are three divine persons, and not one or two). We also know that each person is God, but that there is one God and not three Gods. This final claim is so important, we may list it as a core trinitarian claim:

(3) The Father is God, the Son is God, and Spirit is God.

On a straightforward reading, (1)–(3) entail a contradiction. One way the mysterian trinitarian may approach an apparent contradiction is to shrug and point to the mystery of the divine being. This is a legitimate approach available to mysterians. However, such a response does not respond to the charge of contradiction, and so this approach will not satisfy sceptics, though the approach may be sufficient for trinitarians.

Another approach, one which is not mutually exclusive to the previous one, but nevertheless travels in an opposite direction, is to try to redress the apparent contradiction. One good way to show that the core claims of the doctrine of the trinity do not entail a contradiction is to show how those claims might all be true. This is where ST may usefully re-enter the conversation. Here the apophatic social trinitarian may offer possible scenarios – hypothetical states of affairs or ‘possible worlds’ – in which (1–3) are true and indeed are mutually enforcing.<sup>69</sup>

Stated another way, the apophatic trinitarian may be interested in replying to charges that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically incoherent. To reply to such charges she may proffer a trinitarian model, a story about how God *could* or *might* be. This story shows that it is *possible* for (1) through (3) to be true, but her story does not claim that God really *is* this way. She tells this story to prove that the charges are false, that there is no contradiction. Importantly, she may continue to maintain her ignorance about the meaning of (1–3). That is, the apophatic trinitarian may advance a model of the Trinity, but still maintain mysterianism.<sup>70</sup>

A social trinitarian may also advance models of the Trinity. If an apophatic trinitarian is a social trinitarian then her story will include the idea of three distinct centres of will and intellect. The main plot-line of her story will be something like this: It is possible that the one God is three divine persons, and that each person has

<sup>69</sup> This is a project which analytic theologians and some philosophers of religion have embraced. See for example Craig’s chapter on the Trinity in *Philosophical Foundations*, 575–596.

<sup>70</sup> The trajectory sketched here is not parallel to Alvin Plantinga’s theodicy, in which the bare logical form of the propositions are shown to be compatible in at least some possible worlds. Instead, the response I have in mind is closer to Augustine’s method of using language (such as ‘person’) with a sparse conceptual pool of meaning (i.e., three ‘I know-not-whats’). Thanks to an anonymous reader for bringing Plantinga to my attention.

a maximally perfect will and intellect; in this way each divine person individually can said to be God; there is one God because it is possible that the three persons are the one divine substance and/or each person loves the others maximally. This story employs the fundamental intuition of ST. Yet *the story is posited only as a possible way things can be, and not a statement of how things are*. Here the social trinitarian project is purely defensive or negative in that it models possibility to show that trinitarian doctrine is not impossible.

This social trinitarian response to mysterianism culminates with the following considerations. If mysterianism is true, then the social trinitarian project can no longer be explanatory or positive. It must re-envision itself as a defensive or negative project. As such, ST avoids any whiff of projection, anthropomorphism, and idolatry. The trade-off of course is that the social trinitarian loses the explanatory power of the ST theory, which for many is a big motivation for adopting ST in the first place. If mysterianism is true, then ST as we know it must be abandoned while its core intuition may be profitably employed in a different, wholly negative, project. ST can survive the apophatic turn, but the cost may be too high for most social trinitarians.

## Conclusion

In this article I responded to three main objections to social trinitarianism: the projection critique, the critique of mutual love's anthropomorphism, and the mysterian critique. All three objections are motivated by apophatic considerations, and if any one of them hits its mark, then we have good reason for rejecting ST. I argued that none of the objections are successful. The projection critique fails because nothing about ST necessitates the sorts of rank hubris or idolatry that this critique criticizes. The anthropomorphism critique fails because it has not yet explained why certain anthropomorphic descriptions are impermissible (such as mutual love) and why other anthropomorphic descriptions (such as 'Father and Son') are permissible. Regarding apophaticism, there is no consensus position yet achieved. And if a good case is made for strong theological mysterianism, the social trinitarian has resources other than abandoning ST: she may adopt a mysterian trinitarianism (like that of Davis or Volf), or even posit ST as model instead of an explanatory project. Until advocates of apophaticism make a more convincing case, a Christian is in theological good standing to maintain her ST as a full-blown theory.

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# Apophasis and System. Dogmatic Theology in Apophatic Perspective

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**Abstract:** The subject of the article is the nature of theological apophasis in relation to the systematic aspirations of theological reflection. This relationship is analyzed from the perspective of the three essential truths of Christianity that form the hard core of its message: the Trinity, the personal union of the two natures in Christ, and deification. Accordingly, Trinitarian theology, Christology and anthropology are characterized, each area separately and in relation to the others, by a high degree of systematization. They constitute compact, organic and interrelated theological systems which, as constituent parts, form an organic whole. All three contain significant apophatic themes. An analysis of the connection between their systematicity and their apophatic dimension allows us to draw broader and more general conclusions about apophaticism in general and its place in theological systematization.

**Keywords:** Trinity, Christ, Trinitarian theology, Christology, theological anthropology, deification, dogmatics, system, apophasis

Modern philosophy and theology are characterized by a revival of apophatic consciousness. In theology, this consciousness was crucial at least until the second half of the thirteenth century. Nominalism, voluntarism and then scientific tendencies made the apophatic perspective give way to the search for purely positive and certain knowledge. Today, the apophatic attitude is returning to theology. Unfortunately, it very often returns mutated by postmodern gnoseological pessimism<sup>1</sup> tinged with concealed or explicit atheism. In such a context, this text is an attempt to understand apophasis from its original historical Christian sources. These are especially the Trinitarian and Christological dogma, two constitutive moments of any reflection of Christian theology. They will provide us with important intuitions about apophaticism. They will also allow us to confront it, as essential constitutive moments of Christian theology, with the systematic ambitions of reflection on Revelation. Thus, we are faced with two important questions: about the systematicity of theology and about the nature of apophaticism. These questions converge into a single issue of fundamental importance for theology and its method, but also for the entire Christian worldview: does apophasis invalidate the legitimacy of theology as such? In the face of apophasis as a rule of thought, is theology possible at all, and is it possible as a systematic reflection on Revelation?

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brown – Simmons, *Contemporary Debates*. Important insights can be found in Coward – Fosbay, *Derrida* and Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics*.

## 1. Posing the Problem

Theology, like any other field of science, needs systematization. Systematicity itself (the ability to systematize, order and synthesize) is, in general, one of the basic criteria of its scientific character. Systematization here means not just arranging and presenting knowledge in some key, but reflecting a feature of a certain area of reality and thinking about it: something can only be systematically described when it is something concrete, when it exists as a concrete, if only as pure potentiality. Systematization is based on the truth of a thing and is an attempt to discover and theoretically reproduce it. Systematization of knowledge is thus a requirement for its meaningfulness and scientific nature. Systematization is also related to certainty of knowledge. Certain knowledge is characterized by the ability to express it in a meaningful, systematic way.

Recalling these facts seems to be the need of the hour today, when science theory is balancing between two approaches that cannot be brought together. The humanities, including oftentimes theology, are subject to the postmodern temptation to replace systematization (defined by the great quantifier “metanarrative”) with narrative, essentially an endless, lost in the labyrinth, formless interpretation. The empirical sciences, on the other hand, are the last bastion of common sense and hold firmly to their position of seeking certain, communicable and systematic knowledge. Their basic premise of seeking certainty is often understood as absolute. In the popularized version of the understanding of the sciences, they offer, thanks to this assumption of theirs, knowledge that is almost absolute. Systematicity in science is a necessity. The same is true in theology. In this regard, as Scottish theologian Alexis Torrance has argued, theology remains paradoxically close to the mentality of empirical sciences. However, it does not share the overly radical cognitive optimism that dominates the widespread, popular and very naive understanding of the empirical sciences and their nature, method and purpose. In the case of theology, its self-awareness of limitations is more radical – because of the object of study – than in the empirical sciences. Ultimately, however, what theology and the sciences have in common is a kind of helplessness in the face of the simple richness of reality.

Martin Heidegger tried to demonstrate this. His conviction that theology is as much systematic as it is immersed in history<sup>2</sup> was deeply and realistically part of the twentieth-century project of renewing its forms and deepening the understanding of its essential tasks, and probably, at least in part, stemmed from it. Evidence of such a renewal, its mature fruit, can be seen, for example, in the multi-volume study

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<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology,” 47: “The more historical theology is and the more immediately it brings to word and concept the historicity of faith, the more is it ‘systematic’ and the less likely is it to become the slave of a system. The radicality with which one knows of this task and its methodological exigencies is the criterion for the scientific level of a systematic theology.”



of dogmatics in a paradigm of history of salvation (*heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*).<sup>3</sup> However, let us return to Heidegger. Rather, there is no doubt that theology understood in this way, in his view, is not limited to its history, but draws the vital forces and the object of its reflection from the concrete historical events through which the Triune God communicates Himself and transforms the subject receiving this communication in faith. Thus, historicity allows the systematicity of theology to be founded on the positive, conceptually expressible ground of history. The system here is, as it were, forced and enabled by the factuality of these events, never by a presuppositional metaphysics detached from history. History creates the space for a global view. It is not, as for the structuralists, merely a collection of unconnected, hectic, accidental and random events, but in its true nature makes it possible to reach the truth of existence emerging in time from events. This perspective of Heidegger is indeed based on his intuition of the fundamental connection between being and time and the temporal character of existence, which is inevitably tragic in its characteristic journey (being) towards death (*zum Tode Sein*), the limit of all systematization. Historicity thus makes systematicity possible, but also radically limits it. It appears, then, that Heidegger's claim quoted at the outset points to the horizons of the possibilities of theological systematization, as well as its limitations. And while Heidegger's presuppositional eschatological pessimism is wrong, one must concede that his intuition about systematization, its possibilities, and limits, is itself correct. The broad historicity of our existence provides both grounds and a limit to the possibilities of systematization. Unfortunately, Heidegger's theory is burdened with the error of atheism. This is why Heidegger's entire project of phenomenological hermeneutics ultimately takes on a pessimistic tinge. In an attempt to cover theological apophysis with a discourse on the inevitability of death as the radical end of being and understanding, the pessimism of Heidegger's concept of irreligious existence shows through. Heidegger's fundamental mistake seems to be his decision to radicalize the negative character of apophysis. Behind Heidegger's peculiar apophysis is his de facto atheism, marked by enormous philosophical, cognitive, and existential consequences.

Therefore, I propose in this article to reflect on the relationship between systematization and apophysis. Is theological apophysis an implicit pessimism or even a precursor of atheism, as Claude Bruaire diagnosed?<sup>4</sup> Does apophysis ultimately exclude systematicity? Or does systematization need apophysis? These two seemingly mutually exclusive terms – systematicity and apophysis – are, in my opinion, an inseparable pair in theology and probably not only in it. The assumption that systematicity is the way to transcend cognitive and existential limitations is naive and untenable from the very perspective of the history of theology and dogma. I will try to show this in the first two sections of this article. Then, in the last two sections,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Feiner – Löhner, *Mysterium Salutis*.

<sup>4</sup> Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu*, 21.

I will point out, first, the important way in which apophasis contributes to the systematic nature of theology, and thus its positive and necessary character for theology, and second, I will draw some specific methodological intuitions from the whole. Ultimately, the point is that apophasis is the inner moment of all systematization, its inherent element. This inseparability does not arise from or lead to cognitive pessimism. Heidegger, therefore, erred significantly: history is not only a measure of our finitude and time is not a sentence of final annihilation.

## 2. Apophasis in the Trinitarian Discourse

It is appropriate to begin our review with Trinitarian theology, since it is not only the center of all theological reflection, but also a kind of underlying framework that makes adequate theological systematizations possible.

I would like to begin my reflection on apophasis and Trinitarian theology with a certain forgotten medieval dispute. One of the most difficult issues of the Trinitarian debate, revealed especially in the Middle Ages, was the nature and epistemic status of the Father's unbegottenness. This issue, as is well known, was one of the points of disagreement between Thomas and Bonaventure. Thomas believed that unbegottenness merely meant the negation of the beginning (*negative tantum*). Bonaventure, on the other hand, saw the Father's *innescibilitas* as an expression of his perfection (*perfecta positio* and *plenitudo fontalis*). For him, unlike Thomas, negation is never a source and must contain some reference to a positive assertion. Thomas disagreed with his Franciscan colleague because, in his understanding, he saw in it a significant threat to the relationality of the divine persons, so important in his Trinitarian system. Bonaventure, on the other hand, wanted to emphasize – without tearing apart the unity and equality of the divine persons – the Trinitarian, personal order (*taxis, ordo*) that originates from and rests on the Father. What is important for us here is how to interpret negation. Can there be a pure negation, one that contains no reference to any positivity, to any affirmation? This is a truly metaphysical question with far-reaching implications in the field of theory of cognition and language. It seems that Bonaventure is right, and his defense of the positive dimension of unbegottenness says something important not only about itself but can be transferred into the space of understanding theological language, including especially the role and place of apophasis in theological discourse. Bonaventure's attitude is close to the classical understanding of negation, always in the broader perspective of positive assertion.<sup>5</sup> Bonaventure's attitude, his interpretation of negation by relating it to a positive claim, can serve as the main intuition and guide in further reflections on apophatic theology.

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<sup>5</sup> For more details cf., Woźniak, *Primitas et plenitudo*.

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger points out the paradoxical nature of Trinitarian theology evident in its most classical formulation through the repetition or *redoublement* (*la loi de redoublement*)<sup>6</sup> of the concepts of ousia-hypostasis.<sup>7</sup> The basic paradox of Trinitarian theology resides in the Trinitarian formula “one ousia, three hypostasis,” which organically links unity with multiplicity. Broadly speaking, his evaluation and hermeneutics of the conceptual tools of Trinitarian discourse is based on the conviction that ordinary cognitive limitations combined with the natural limits of language determine the nature of theological knowledge. The example of the developmental dynamics of Trinitarian theology and its concepts serves Ratzinger to reveal a fundamental characteristic of theological knowledge. Its task is not to enclose reality in concepts, to reduce it to stagnant categories of thought, but to open it up, to initiate thinking in the concrete direction determined by the historical interplay of heresy and orthodoxy. Thus, to the extent that the Trinitarian formula is paradoxical, it is at the same time apophatic: it simultaneously points to the possibilities of thinking and understanding and marks the area of ignorance and inaccessibility, the radical otherness of its object of reference. Knowledge in theology does not pretend to privilege theory over reality,<sup>8</sup> or language over being,<sup>9</sup> but presupposes an ever better, coherent opening to that reality. The theological apophasis in the Trinitarian discourse thus serves to identify and orient knowledge to reality, not to theory. It fundamentally reveals the inadequacy of all theoretical and conceptual approaches. At the same time, this inadequacy is not about fallibility, but always about the primacy of reality itself over ideas. Theological theory should therefore balance between identifying concrete patterns that make it possible to define its object, and pointing to its own cognitive limitations. Explanation in theology does not mean the final resolution of a problem, but pointing out its meaningfulness and, at the same time, the inadequacy of any theory in relation to the very object of search. As one can see, the apophatic moment is presupposed here as an essential and inalienable part of the cognitive strategy. The system and apophasis are not mutually exclusive, but mutually complementary.<sup>10</sup> Theological

6 Redoublement is described in Lafont, *Peut-on connaître*, 130: “Pour dire un aspect quelconque du Mystère, il faut toujours employer en succession continue deux formules qui, sans doute, se complètent, la Révélation nous en est garante, mais dont nous ne pouvons saisir que la non-contradiction.”

7 For the concept of person both in Christology and Trinitarian theology, see Patterson, *Chalcedonian Personalism*, 3–29. Cf. Larchet, *Personne at nature*.

8 I can see a sort of similarity here between Ratzinger and pope Francis. Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 231: “There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. So a third principle comes into play: realities are greater than ideas. This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality[...].”

9 Maspero, “Ontologia e dogma,” 333: “Il discorso sulle Persone divine e le loro distinzioni relazionali non viola l’apofatismo, caposaldo ontologico della concezione cappadoce, che sempre afferma l’eccezione dell’essere rispetto al linguaggio.”

10 As Ari Ojell (“Apophatic Theology,” 68) points out in the case of Gregory of Nyssa: “The theology of G. is apophatic in the sense that apophasis is a systematic device in his works, as a part of a speculative system that he has sought to construct in coherent manner in order to support the Trinitarian confession.”

theory and theological system must contain an apophatic moment, which protects them from error (especially the reduction of reality to theory), simplification and cognitive stagnation.

Ratzinger's Trinitarian theology is clearly based on ancient disputes over the nature of theological knowledge of the Trinity and theological language itself in general, as well as their theoretical benefits. One important aspect of these disputes was the theory of theological knowledge, meaning of negation and the language of theology.<sup>11</sup> This can be seen clearly in the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocians and in the way they rejected and refuted the theory of the Eunomians. Let us briefly recall what the dispute was about. Eunomius and his followers radically denied the divinity of the Son. Their argument was based on the premise that if the Son is begotten, he cannot be God equal to the Father.<sup>12</sup> The response of the Cappadocians, especially Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, follows the line of analyzing the eunomian argument and identifying the initial error hidden in them. The Cappadocians find this error in the eunomian theory of language.<sup>13</sup> Their Trinitarian error stems from an error in understanding the nature of language. Eunomians turn out to be linguistic naturalists and hyperrealists in a close analysis of Cappadocians. They believe that the concepts of our language fully correspond to the described reality. Meanwhile, Cappadocians argue, language is a finite, limited, imperfect reality. To put it a bit more technically: language is a created reality, and as such is incapable of adequately closing the gap dividing the Creator and the creation.

It is worth summarizing the above themes with Rowan Williams, who, in his own proper way, demonstrates the hermeneutical depth of the issues raised here. "Negative theology of the trinitarian life," affirms the British theologian,

derives its negative character not from general and programmatic principles about the ineffability of the divine nature, but from the character of the relations enacted in the story of Jesus and thus also in the lives and life-patterns of believers. The apophatic is not simply a response to the perceived grammar of talking about God – though this is a significant element in apophatic usage and an appeal to the narrative and relational aspect of it should not blind us to these grammatical considerations. The development of a coherent language about the unknowability of the divine nature went originally hand-in-hand with a clarification of the distinctness of the hypostases. The more it became necessary to insist that the difference of the hypostases could not be assimilated to the sort of differences with which we are familiar, the clearer it became that the differentiation of Father, Son and Spirit had to be conceived in the strictest possible connection with the traditional set of negations about divine nature – that it does not admit of materiality, divisibility, degrees

11 Very good and comprehensive introduction to these issues can be found in Stępien – Kocharczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*.

12 For more details cf. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 252–265.

13 Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*; Usacheva, *Knowledge*, 59–70.

of completeness, varying levels of instantiation and so on [...] Thus the use of negation to characterise the divine life expresses not simply the retreat of the finite mind before infinite reality – though it does at least that; it expresses the process of “finding our way” within the life of the three divine agencies or subsistents [...] Apophatic theology is more than a conceptual move, because it is anchored in the reality of personal kenosis, divine and human. Here is the final answer to the question about how we are, in negative theology, to avoid a polarising of inaccessible divine substance of nature and manifest persons. Apophatic observations about the divine nature are “grammatical” remarks about the impossibility of specifying what it is that makes God to be God. Apophatic accounts of the trinitarian persons and their relations are a way of expressing and evoking the particular theme of the endlessness and non-possession of trinitarian relation, gift or love. The two dimensions of negative theology here do not represent two objects under discussion (nature and persons), but simply mark the two moments of recognising the radicality of divine difference that arise in the lived process of not only trying to speak consistently of God but trying to live coherently in the pattern of divine life as it is made concrete to us in the history of Jesus and made available to us in the common life of the Spirit-filled community.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Apophasis in Christology

The moment of connection between apophasis and systematization is most evident in classical Christology. By its classical version I mean the scheme developed in Chalcedonian theology. Let us recall an important part of the definition of Christological faith:

Following, therefore, the holy fathers, we all in harmony teach confession of one and the same Son our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and the same truly man, of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in respect of the Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in respect of the manhood, like us in all things apart from sin, begotten from the Father before the ages in respect of the Godhead, and the same in the last days for us and for our salvation from the Virgin Mary the Theotokos in respect of the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation (the difference of the natures being in no way destroyed by the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved and coming together into one person and one hypostasis), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, Only-begotten, God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ, even as the prophets from of old and Jesus Christ himself taught us about him and the symbol of the fathers has handed down to us.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 133–135.

<sup>15</sup> Price, *The Acts*, 207.

It is well known, and can be easily seen in the quoted text, that the dogmatic formula of the Council of Chalcedon is the result of an attempt to mediate between two ways of thinking, which are broadly defined by the names of the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools. The Chalcedonian *horos* is a kind of attempt to reach a compromise between the theology of the Antiochians, emphasizing the distinction of natures in Christ, and the Alexandrians trying to emphasize the radical unity of Christ at all costs. The Christological formula asserts the existence in Christ of a personal unity of two natures, divine and human, and up to this point is eminently positive, affirmative, cataphatic.<sup>16</sup>

However, the systematic nature of the Chalcedonian formula is not limited to positive statements. At the very meaningful center of the *horos*, we find a definite expression of the apophatic consciousness of the Council fathers.<sup>17</sup> The four negations clearly demonstrate that the fathers do not claim to understand and linguistically exhaust the mystery described. This is not the intent of the definition at all. Emphasizing that the hypostatic union took place without mixing and changing, and without separation and disconnection of the two natures indicates that they have no positive knowledge of the mode of union itself beyond the aforementioned formula that speaks of union in *hyspostasis* of the two natures. They only know, in a certain way, how this union should not be understood. It is in this apophatic moment that one should see the essential mediation and compromise as the vital presuppositions and goals of the conciliar assembly. It is this moment that is an essential, inalienable part of the description of the hypostatic union.

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<sup>16</sup> In this sense, I agree with Bruce McCormack's statement (*The Humility*, 57): "the real interest of the majority of bishops at Chalcedon does not lie so much in the integrity of the natures, important as that was to them. Their attention was captured by the unity, the singularity of the Christological 'person' in whom the two natures subsist. There is, they say, but one prosopon and one hypostasis – not two. One prosopon might have left ambiguity, but one hypostasis (one 'concrete existence' of a single individual) most certainly does not. The one hypostasis in which the natures subsist is that of the eternal Word. Seen in this light, it is a serious error – made by both conservatives and liberals in twentieth century Anglo-American theology – to become fixated on the four adverbs (without confusion, without change, without division, without separation), as though the Chalcedonian Definition lived from its negations and had nothing positive to say. No, a well-developed Christological model is being advanced here, albeit in abbreviated form, and that model is Cyril's in all of its decisive respects."

<sup>17</sup> Coakley, "What Does Chalcedon Solve," 159–163. On the pages 161–162 one can find an important affirmation: "It is worth enumerating, finally and in closing, some of the vital christological issues that Chalcedon per se cannot and does not solve. Not only is this undertaking suitably chastening, it also invites the last ecumenical reflection: is Chalcedon's 'limit' regrettable or laudable? Thus: (1) Chalcedon does not tell us in what the divine and human 'natures' consist; (2) it does not tell us what hypostasis means when applied to Christ; (3) it does not tell us how hypostasis and physeis are related, or how the physeis relate to one another (the problem of the *communicatio idiomatum*); (4) it does not tell us how many wills Christ has; (5) it does not tell us that the hypostasis is identical with the pre-existent Logos; (6) it does not tell us what happens to the physeis at Christ's death and in his resurrection; (7) it does not tell us whether the meaning of hypostasis in this christological context is different, or the same, from the meaning in the trinitarian context; (8) it does not tell us whether the risen Christ is male."

Thus, the Christological apophysis of Chalcedon belongs to and is an integral part of the positive interpretation of the mystery of Christ. It seems that in this respect, the positive and negative moments integrally and organically overlap and merge to form a systematic, comprehensive picture of the mystery.<sup>18</sup> The formula proposed by Chalcedon remains the cornerstone of all Christological reflection and is impassable, above all in terms of its fundamental intuition and the aforementioned apophaticism. Theology in the future, in dialogue with philosophy and the empirical sciences, may find new concepts to better grasp the unity and plurality in Christ – in this respect (as a statement of the differentiated unity of Christ), it seems impassable in terms of its basic intuition (the coexistence of unity and plurality), not the concepts used in it. Similarly, it should be said that the formula is impassable in terms of its apophatic nature. What is stated therein is not merely the categorical, historical ignorance of the Council fathers, but the apophatic nature of the very reality they describe of the coexistence of unity and plurality expressed through the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Thus, it should be stated that the Chalcedonian dogmatic definition includes both the intuition of Christ's differentiated unity, the hypostatic union, and the impossibility of rationally grasping and positively expressing the manner in which it occurred. Such impossibility is not meant to inhibit and stop thinking and searching for better ways to express the revealed facts. Its function, however, is to sustain awareness of the uniqueness of what was accomplished in Christ. Apophysis, the apophatic element, thus proves to be a constant moment of all systematizations in the field of Christology.

It must not be forgotten at this point that Christology plays a unique role in theology as a whole.<sup>19</sup> The Chalcedonian dogma, in all its parts, determines a certain type of thinking, the grammar of Christian theology. This grammar contains the basic information on how theological reasoning should be done, and at the same time is the fundamental theory of theological language.<sup>20</sup> As such, it is a source in understanding the theological episteme in itself. If we consistently accept the Chalcedonian dogma in all its integrity, with all its components, we will find that the moment of apophysis, which we have already discovered earlier in the space of

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<sup>18</sup> It is difficult not to mention here the further development of the Chalcedonian formula, especially the achievements of the reflection of Leontius of Byzantium founding the so-called Neo-Chalcedonism of the Second Council of Constantinople (553). St. Leontius' doctrine of personal union and his theory of the person in Christ clearly revolves around assertion and negation. Leontius states that there is no human hypostasis in the incarnate Word, and that the function of hypostasis is performed for him by the divine hypostasis of the Word. Leontius is keen to positively emphasize the personal unity of the incarnate Word. To express it in all its fullness, he uses not only affirmation (*en-hypostatos*), but also negation (*a-hypostatos*). He thus continues the essential apophatic theme of the entire theological tradition. For more details cf. Daley, *Introduction*, 73–75.

<sup>19</sup> Woźniak, "The Christological Prism," 519–530.

<sup>20</sup> On the Chalcedonian theory of language cf. Need, *Human Language*; on the apophatic dimension of the issue see *ibidem*, 74–76.

Trinitarian theology, is inalienable in the Christian understanding of God, the world and the relationship between the world and God. Let us put it bluntly. Assuming that the essential element, both from an intellectual and existential perspective, of Christian theology is the mystery of the closeness of God and the world, a mystery that reaches its peak in the hypostatic union and draws its strength from it, it must be said that to the extent that theology wants to be systematic in its description of this mystery, it must not only be grounded in a history open to positive metaphysical description, but must also include an apophatic moment. Christology and Trinitarian theology discover the said mystery and point to it. This mystery itself, indicated, identified, is forever beyond the possibility of exhaustive investigation and justification within the category of “pure reason.” Therefore, if apophasis is central to Christology, which in turn is the grammar of all categorical theological statements, this means that any truly Christian theological system must include an apophatic element.

In conclusion, it is clear from the above reasoning that apophasis is both a dimension of Christological systematicity, and that any adequate Christological system is characterized by the feature of apophaticism. This can be clearly seen at two points. First, there is the noted conceptual doubling (repetition) (*hypostasis* and *ousia*) present in both Trinitarian theology and Christology. Second, the Christological formula contains within itself a distinct apophatic moment, which refers to the manner of the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ. In the first case, we encounter in the hermeneutics of dogma a conceptual impotence of language expressed in the inability to contain the described reality of Revelation in a single concept. In the second case, on the other hand, it is a conscious expression of the lack of knowledge regarding the said union of the two natures. The Fathers are able to perceive the truth of the Revealed fact, they know what took place, but they do not know how this union happened. This lack of knowledge, of course, also applies to the consequences of the union itself, such as the manner of communication between the two natures. This can be seen clearly in the problem of Jesus’ human consciousness. This issue, however, goes beyond the subject matter of the present text.

#### 4. Mind the Gap!

The above review of the relationship of systematization in Trinitarian theology and Christology should be put to the more global question of what is the real meaning of apophasis in theology?

In order to find an answer to this question, it is first necessary to illuminate the relationship between the three fundamental classical ways of speaking about the Triune



God. Theology has classically assumed three cognitive strategies: assertion, negation and elevation. Let us first note the nature of the continuum of the aforementioned triad. All of its three moments are interrelated, they constitute a kind of structure. As a structure, they constitute a chronologically and purposefully ordered whole. Theology always begins its path of cognition and understanding with an assertion, which by its nature is based on the principle of analogy. It then makes a negation, also ultimately resulting from its analogical nature. At the very end of the path of cognition is the moment of transcendence, indeed tinged with the distinctly liturgical nature of theological activity. As an example, consider the concept of goodness applied to the Triune God. The cognitive triad would look as follows in this case: God is good (assertion), God is not good as creatures are good (negation), God is super-good (liturgical language of superiority, glory). Note that the two moments of the triad have a clearly positive character, and the fact that the whole triad aims at liturgical praise. It follows therefore that apophasis is neither primary nor final in theology. It is not apophasis that is its goal, but the liturgical adoration of God. All theology aims at the adoration of God. Apophasis is essential and inalienable here, but its nature can only be understood in terms of the cataphatic, liturgical purposiveness of all activity in theology. Apophasis, negation, does not have its own independent life in theology but serves the positive reading of the central message of the gospel and Christianity.

What does this positivity, palpable in the linguistic and cognitive strategy of Christian theology, concern? The answer is to be found in Christianity's central belief in divine-human communion. At the center of Christianity is not the Triune God himself or man alone, but, by virtue of divine Trinitarian freedom and choice, the divine-human communion. It is undoubtedly Aristotle Papanikolaou who can be credited with demonstrating that apophatic discourse is a radical requirement for such an account of the essence of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The divine-human communion is built on the deification of man. Using the example of Lossky and Zizioulas, Papanikolaou points out in *Being with God* the essential connection between Trinitarian theology, apophaticism and the reality of deifying communion with God. The thread of the relationship between the Trinitarian deification discourse and apophasis deserves careful theological analysis. I believe that it is in it that the essence of apophasis, as well as its purposefulness, becomes most apparent. If we accept the organic connection between Trinitarian theology and deification, apophasis turns out to be an additional factor connecting the two realities. We have already learned the place and importance of apophasis within the boundaries of Trinitarian and Christological discourse. In both cases, apophasis has proven to be an essential component of the globally framed project of Christian theology. This important role of apophasis should be understood from a cognitive perspective, but not only that way. The apophatic moment

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<sup>21</sup> Papanikolaou, *Being With God*.

of Trinitarian theology and Christology enters into the general theological theory of cognition as its organic moment. At the same time, it is a constituent and indispensable dimension of the theology of deification and Christian anthropology based on it.

In this regard, special attention should be paid to the application of the two moments of apophatic discourse, discovered in Trinitarian theology and Christology, to the doctrine of deification and Christian anthropology based on it. These are the distinction between person and nature described above and the apophatic moment of the Chalcedonian dogma describing from the negative perspective the personal union of two natures in the one person of the incarnate Word.

The doctrine of deification describes the real transformation that takes place in man under the influence of an encounter with God and the granting of His Trinitarian grace. This transformation is real. Through it, the Triune God dwells personally in man, permeating all dimensions of his human existence with His sanctifying presence. The result of the deifying action of the Triune God in man is his full hominization. This entire process cannot be understood without applying to it, as a hermeneutical paradigm, the apophatic themes of Trinitarian theology and Christology. First, since deification takes place as the indwelling of the Trinity in man, resulting in man's participation in the divine nature, the nature of this deification remains ultimately encompassed by the rule of Trinitarian apophasis. Man's personal participation in the Trinitarian nature of God is inexpressible in all its fullness in human language. Just as the richness of the revealed mystery of the inner life of the Trinity cannot be encapsulated in a single concept and requires conceptual doubling (personal and natural order), so deification requires a constant balancing act ("suspended middle") between nature and grace. The idea of deification does not cognitively exhaust what actually becomes of man and takes place in him through the work of the Triune God. It only points to the fact itself as impossible to encapsulate and inexhaustible in a single concept.

In such a perspective, we can touch on an important thread of the theology of deification. It is a matter of great importance, including in the area of contemporary Christian apologetics, whose main challenge becomes the problem of connecting human subjectivity, its enduring value and distinctiveness (autonomy) in the perspective of God's action. Henri de Lubac has shown that modern atheism (I think this diagnosis remains relevant also with regard to the recently widely discussed "new atheism") is based on the conviction that religion leads to alienation and degradation of man.<sup>22</sup> As we can see, deification can be understood in the monophysite paradigm

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<sup>22</sup> De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, xxv: "On the one hand, though the dualist – or, perhaps better, separatist – thesis has finished its course, it may be only just beginning to bear its bitterest fruit. As fast as professional theology moves away from it, it becomes so much more widespread in the sphere of practical action. While wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, people had in fact exiled it altogether – both from intellectual and from social life – leaving the field free to be taken over by secularism. Today that secularism, following its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They

as a kind of possession of man by God. It is at this point that Chalcedonian apophaticism comes to the rescue. Indeed, it is not only concerned with the structure of Christ's being, but it also turns out to be crucial for understanding Christian anthropology founded on deification.<sup>23</sup> As we remember, the conciliatory nature of the Chalcedonian dogma, without pointing to the manner of personal union, indicates how it did not happen. The idea is to push away the shallow approaches conventionally called Monophysite and Nestorian. The whole strategy clearly indicates that the union is real and at the same time it does not entail either the mixing of natures (divine nature does not absorb human nature) or their separation (the union is real, existential and metaphysical). One can now see how this definition relates to anthropology based on deification. Theosis – analogous to the hypostatic union – does not entail the annihilation of what is human. Nor does it modify the granting divinity. On the contrary, the granting Trinity remains unchanged, and the deified man becomes fully himself. Thus, although we cannot express what is accomplished in deification (the apophatic moment), we know that its effect is something radically positive – the fullness of humanity in the imitation of humanity of the incarnate Word. Deification thus preserves the difference between the Creator and the creation.

This brings us to the crucial moment of the meaning of apophasis. We already know that apophasis does not exhaust the nature of theology, but is a component part of its inherently positive, cataphatic orientation. This, in turn, is based on the ontological difference between God and man, the Creator and the creation. Apophasis in theology stems from this difference, from its metaphysical, indelible factuality and subjective consciousness. At the same time, it is apophasis that articulates this difference, which not only remains intact in the union, but is also the condition of its possibility and meaningfulness. Apophasis is thus, metaphysically speaking, the result of the actual metaphysical difference between the Creator and the creation. As part of the cognitive strategy of theology, it corresponds to the awareness of the existence and essentiality of this difference and its ultimately positive character. Apophasis reminds us to “mind the gap.”<sup>24</sup>

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too seek to find a harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or an atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to him, is pushed so far into the background as to look like disappearing for good. The last word in Christian progress and the entry into adulthood would then appear to consist in a total secularization which would expel God not merely from the life of society, but from culture and even from personal relationships.” Cf. De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Torrance, *Human Perfection*.

<sup>24</sup> More on the topic of the relation between apophasis and the difference/gap and on the centrality of apophatic strategy in the theological and anthropological discourse on deification cf. Woźniak, *Różnica i tajemnica*, 397–486. The most important conviction in this book can be summarized by the following quotations: (a.) “Apothatic theology is a way of perceiving and articulating the difference between God and His creation, a difference that does not disappear in the event of salvific revelation, but is reinforced and exposed in it as an essential and fundamental element of union” (*ibidem* 471) and (b.) “At first glance, it might seem that a reading of Christianity in the key of radicalized apophaticism is appropriate. After all,

At this point, we shall return to the already discussed topic of *diastêma*, the gap, the difference. The awareness of it has been a constant reference point for theology since antiquity and a basic formal determinant of its methodology. Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>25</sup> Dionysius and Maximus<sup>26</sup> made it one of the cornerstones of their theological systems. This situation did not change in the Middle Ages either.<sup>27</sup> However, it was significantly violated by modern idealisms with their ever-present temptation to neglect the ontological difference between the Creator and the creation. Their starting point and destination was pantheism, in the shadow of which atheism, the rejection of God in the name of existence and human freedom, was already hidden. The classical emphasis on the existence of the *diastêma*, let us note, was not

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Christianity is an experience of God's transcendence, His absolute otherness, the difference separating Him and the world. However, as the analysis of the concept of difference in its relation to the event of revelation has shown, this difference, from the point of view of Christian theology, does not lead to the disappearance of knowledge or existential contact. Difference is not a dialectical concept in Christianity. Hence, Christian apophaticism as an affirmation of difference cannot serve to ground cognitive-metaphysical skepticism and affirm the moral disorder that characterizes the postmodern worldview. The theological theory of cognition in Christianity is always based on the excess of light that enters the world in the event of Christ. His grace is the grace of cognition, of divine-human fellowship in the freedom to know and love. In the light of the Spirit illuminating the Christ event – in some mysterious way that no one could ever foresee or expect – one can see the invisible Father Himself, the source of divinity and the source of the world's existence. St. Thomas's visio Dei is not a pipe dream of alienated reason, but a gracious granting of God in the Son and the Spirit, in which knowledge and ignorance of him presuppose each other, founding the possibility of continual encounter, that is, at the same time, the possibility of man's continual coming to himself from the depths of his encounter with God in Christ and the Spirit" (*ibidem* 486–487).

<sup>25</sup> Douglass, "Diastêma," 227: "Ever since the publication in 1942 of von Balthasar's *Présence et pensée*, the importance of the concept of *diastêma* (διαστήμα) in the thought of Gregory has received considerable attention. The word itself refers to 'an interval or a gap' and, in its more conceptual register, to 'the inescapable horizontal extensions of both space and time.' To Gregory, it was the very fabric of the created order. Along with *kinêsis*, its presence indelibly marked creation as having been created and therefore constituted what Hans Urs von Balthasar aptly called the 'irréductible opposition entre Dieu et la créature.' Gregory observed: 'For the gap is great and impassable by which the uncreated nature is hindered from the created essence . . . the one is stretched out by a certain dimensional extension (*diastématikê*), being enclosed by time and space, the other transcends every notion of dimension (*diastêmatos*) . . .' (GNO I, 246, 14–21) Creation has *diastêma*; God does not. Creation is 'enclosed by time and space; God is not. The implications of this fundamental distinction and its relationship to *diastêma* permeated all of Gregory's theological thinking (*diastêma* and its cognates appear in 23 of his works). On an epistemological level, the implications of *diastêma* concerned the restricted scope of any human knowledge of God: 'Thus the whole created order is unable to get out of itself through a comprehensive vision, but remains continually enclosed within itself, and whatever it beholds, it is looking at itself . . . One may struggle to surpass or transcend *diastématikên* conception . . . but he does not transcend. For in every object it conceptually discovers, it always comprehends the *diastêma* inherent in the being of the apprehended object, for *diastêma* is nothing other than creation itself' (GNO V, 412, 6–14). Every human perception and conception begins and ends with *diastêma*: it can be neither transcended nor escaped. Humanity's desire, therefore, to understand a God who transcends every notion of *diastêma* must constantly negotiate the self-referential inability to conceive or comprehend anything but *diastêma*. Language itself is one of the by-products of this negotiation. Gregory established the following ratios: *diastêma*, language."

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lévy, *Le créé et l'incréé*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Raffray, *Métaphysique des relations*. Cf. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*. One should refer to two important studies: Humbrecht, *Théologie négative* and Humbrecht, *Trinité et création*.

only about the truth of the Triune God, but also about man and his vocation to participate in the Trinitarian, personal life of God. *Diastêma* secures not only the transcendence of the Triune God, but also the identity of man. At the same time, it is not a measure of remoteness, but de facto, a measure of possible proximity. *Diastêma* is therefore required not only in theology, but also in anthropology and soteriology. It is also required in an evangelically adequate theory of spiritual life. In a manner appropriate to Christianity, theology, anthropology and soteriology here interlock and condition one another. Apophasis, as a cognitive and communicative strategy, serves the *diastêma* as a structural element of any adequate vision of the essence of Christianity. For it makes it possible to simultaneously articulate the transcendence of the self-giving Trinity, man's otherness and identity, and the radically true and transformative divine-human communion (*theosis*) that makes man a new creation.

Let us draw conclusions from this state of affairs regarding the relationship between the system and apophasis. On the one hand, apophasis understood in this way is a necessary moment of a theological system for substantive reasons already enumerated and described above. On the other hand, any system without apophasis as a cognitive and communicative strategy that allows for the simultaneous articulation of the positivity of difference and the possibility of communion is at risk of being a totalitarian simulacrum of reality and its truth. The totalitarianism of the system – from the epistemological perspective – is characterized by the drive to exhaust reality, to finally encapsulate its meaning in a concept. This approach has obvious consequences in the field of politics and social life, analyzed quite thoroughly by E. Levinas and H. Arendt, among others. Their analysis, however, goes beyond the subject of the present study. What is important for us is the observation that in the case of totalitarian, unifying systems, quite the opposite of Christian theology, reality is replaced by ideas and the expression of the positivity of otherness becomes virtually impossible. It is then difficult to talk about systematicity in general. A system that replaces reality with ideas does not satisfy either the truth of things or the requirements of systematicity.

An outstanding example of such a systemic approach is Hegel's theory.<sup>28</sup> Yes, it contains a strong negative moment, but this one has nothing to do with apophasis and its metaphysical and theological ideological background. Negation here leads to the establishment of an undifferentiated unity of reality, the pinnacle of which is a concept. Hegel forgot about the difference and tried to transcend it in an empty, cold idea in which everything and nothing are identified with each other.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For a historical, intellectual and social background of such a philosophical development and its real meaning cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, 76–124.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this topic, see Hass, "Hegel," 131–161.

## Conclusion: Some Methodological Remarks in the Context Of Transcending Heideggerian Cognitive Pessimism

We can now return to Heidegger's pessimism. Let us recall that he claimed that theology, in order to be systematic, must reject metaphysics and become an existential reflection on history. And to consider historicity, human thinking being in time, as this being always, irrevocably and inevitably leads to defeat, ultimately means radical cognitive pessimism.

Adopting from Heidegger the conviction that the essential moment of the definition of systematics is its connection with the historicity of our existence, with our being in a particular time and place, I understand it to mean that this being and its temporal spatiality becomes, through the divine *eudokia*, the means of revelation and salvation. In other words, it is about the created and redeemed nature of our existence as the fundamental determination of its character and the scope of its possibilities and limitations. It is in this fundamental sense that history cannot be understood solely as a journey toward nothingness, as a journey toward death, as the ultimate end of a human being and hence the end and sign of the futility of any hermeneutic project. Instead, it becomes a medium, a space, a horizon for the deifying human transformation. It remains an essential limitation for the seeking man, but at the same time in this limitation it represents, thanks to grace, a real possibility of finite openness to the infinite. Here we observe a kind of transformation of the meaning of negativity and cognitive limitations. From the radical obstacle and impossibility of human fulfillment, the natural limitation of history is embraced by the radical positivity of God's actual action within it. This embrace does not abolish man's natural finiteness and limitation, but opens them to eternity, transforming them in such a way that they become an inner moment of opening to the infinite. All this is not irrelevant to the understanding of apophysis itself. For it confirms our initial intuition that the negative apophatic moment of theological discourse is encompassed by the positivity of the divine event itself for and within history, an event that in the resurrection is the opening of the way. This does not in any way nullify the essence of the apophatic moment, but gives it the ultimate meaning and a natural place in theology.

In order to gather the presented themes into a whole, as well as to draw concrete inspiration from them for theologians' daily work, I propose the following theses on both the nature and method of theology.

*First*, Christian theology contains *de jure*, by virtue of its own essence, an apophatic moment. Its aim is not so much and not originally a mere rational explanation, but to point to the fundamental facts of Revelation without reducing them to the categories of previously known experience. Without apophysis, it is not possible to grasp properly the object of theological discourse without naturalizing and rationalizing it. Therefore, since theology cannot achieve without an apophatic moment

the realization of its own task and its own nature, it cannot become systematic without it. This can be expressed in yet another way: since the proper object of theology is revelation in all its uniqueness and otherness beyond natural expectations and foresight, theology cannot satisfy this object and render it, describe it adequately without strongly emphasizing this otherness. This emphasis is achieved precisely through apophasis, whose cognitive strategy is directed towards expressing the otherness of what has been given, revealed. Theology can only become systematic if it can point to the otherness emphasized here.

*Second*, precisely for this reason, the apophatic rule, the apophatic moment of theology, is not an end in itself, but plays a servant role in the holistic theological project. Theology does not reduce itself to a strategy of negation. It aims to make certain positive claims. This positive moment is indeed important for understanding the nature and purpose of Christian theology. And although it never exists – at least in the present aeon – in isolation from apophasis, it comes to the fore and determines all theological activity. In this positivity, the main task of theology is the indication of the transformation taking place in man and the world through God's action. This action, in itself, to be adequately illuminated, requires to be positioned between assertion and negation, with the assumption that ultimately the whole triadic structure of theology aims at liturgical adoration.

*Third*, the apophatic moment of theology is organically linked to the possibility of creating theological systems. It is not that apophasis determines the systematicity of theology, but that it is an indispensable part of it. The project of systematization and system-making in Christian theology is not possible without presupposing the possibility of arriving at truly positive knowledge. Theology can become systematic not because the only thing it can express is the absolute ineffability of God, but because, in all its awareness of this ineffability and unknowability, it points to the positive excess of the mystery given, also to be understood. In this respect, apophasis contributes to the systematicity of theology insofar as it emphasizes the positive knowledge of God's ineffability, in which the conviction of his divine magnificence is concealed *in nuce*.

*Fourth*, the rationality of theology should not be understood as stripping the mystery of its mysteriousness, but as illuminating it more fully, showing all its surprising grandeur and splendor. To the extent that theology is able to respect the mystery of the Triune God in this way, that is, to respect His concrete, historical unveiling and giving of Himself to us, to respect it in all its difference and otherness (apophatic moment), to that extent it is rational and systematic.

*Fifth*, the expression of the rationality of theology, of its cognitively positive character, is the awareness of its own ignorance and of the irreducibility of the reality given in Revelation to concepts. Theologians in their work are aware that they are not able to contain Revelation in a single concept, moreover, that every concept will always be incomplete, inadequate. For this reason, any good theological systematization

requires an adequate understanding of language, which is capable of encompassing both its natural limitations and the perspectives given to it in Revelation. Systematization thus requires not only an acknowledgement of cognitive weakness, but also coming to terms with the limitation of language's capacity to express and communicate what is already somehow understood. The more theology can take into account the factuality of all these limitations, the more systematic it becomes.

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# One God – Many Religions? The Role of Negative Theology in Contemporary Interpretations of Religious Pluralism

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the role of negative theology in contemporary interpretations of religious pluralism in an analytical and synthetic way. One of such interpretations is the pluralistic theology of religion. In view of the problems encountered due to such a way of looking at religions, a different direction of interpretation is proposed in the article. Accepting the validity of the basic intention of negative theology, the author presents a thesis that a Christian theology of religious pluralism can be based on Trinitarian theology as a kind of “matrix” of religious experience. A systematic criterion was used in the elaboration of the subsequent steps: (1) The faces of transcendence, (2) The pluralist hypothesis, (3) *Via negativa*, (4) The limits of negation, (5) Experience and language, (6) The nature of transcendence, (7) Toward a Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism. The presented model of Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism can be called an integrative model. It is based on the assumption that it is possible to demonstrate certain similarities between the properties of the individual Persons of the Trinity and various ideas and concepts of Ultimate Reality found in different religions.

**Keywords:** negative theology, religious pluralism, pluralistic theology of religion, Ultimate Reality, Trinitarian theology

There are different images of Ultimate Reality in different religions. Where do those differences come from? How can they be explained? Isn't the source of religion the revelation or experience *of the same* God? Is it possible for God to once reveal himself as a personal „You” (YHWH, Heavenly Father, Allah), inviting a man to a salvific dialogue and community of life, and another time as an impersonal and nameless Reality (Brahman, Dharmakāya, Nirvāna, Shūnyatā), against which one can only remain silent? The purpose of the article is, first, to find an appropriate hermeneutic of religion to give a meaningful and theologically credible answer to the above questions. Second, to present the role that negative theology plays in contemporary interpretations of religious pluralism. Apophatism is one of the pillars of the so-called pluralistic theology of religion, according to which the plurality of religions is the result of culturally conditioned interpretations of one and the same Ultimate Reality, which, in itself, is incomprehensible and indescribable. In view of the problems encountered due to such a way of looking at religions, a different direction of interpretation is proposed in the article. Accepting the validity of the basic intention of negative theology, the author presents a thesis that a Christian theology

of religious pluralism can be based on Trinitarian theology as a kind of „matrix” of religious experience. God is the Triune God, therefore every authentic revelation or religious experience is of the Trinitarian nature. That does not mean that all religions contain some sort of „pre-phenomenon” or „archetype” of Trinitarian faith. It rather means that different images and concepts of God, as well as the way of experiencing the relationship with Him, are given different forms depending on which of the Persons of the Trinity (in the Christian sense) they are specifically oriented towards. It seems that such different understandings and approaches to the mystery of God have surprising counterparts in the great religions of the world.

## 1. The Faces of Transcendence

Essentially, in terms of religions, there are two opposing concepts of Ultimate Reality: personal (theistic) and non-personal (non-theistic). The personal concept is characteristic mainly of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Their followers are convinced that there is a personal God, the creator of the world and a man, the giver of life and the basis of all existence. The term “person” can be understood in different ways. With regard to God, it indicates, first of all, that He is a being with cognition, power and will; therefore He also has the ability to enter into a dialogical relationship with a man.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach to Ultimate Reality resulted in various anthropomorphisms, which; however, began to be explained quite early as allegories and metaphors helpful for our way of understanding God. Consequently, the anthropomorphisms were not removed but corrected and given the appropriate meaning and sense. While it was done, it was emphasized that no symbols or images of God found in the Bible could be literally applied to God. As Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) wrote: “Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, one cannot know who God really is, one can only know who He is not. Such reasoning is called the path or negative/apophatic theology (Greek: ἀπόφασις, negation): it is the path to infinity through the negation of all that is finite. It begins when the human mind understands that it is not possible to define the mystery of God by means of any analogies, images and concepts drawn from the created world. The sense of inadequacy and limitation of the positive qualities attributed to God prompts the reason to rise above positive concepts. However, that does not mean their complete abandonment. God is the being the human mind senses in

1 Cf. Kreiner, “Gottesbegriff,” 153.

2 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 81.

the creation and, at the same time, He is different, absolutely transcendent in relation to the reality of the created world.<sup>3</sup>

Non-personal concepts of Transcendent Reality are characteristic mainly of Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Those religions are sometimes referred to as mystical or apophatic religions as they emphasize the transcendent nature of Ultimate Reality.<sup>4</sup>

Hindu ideas about Ultimate Reality focus on Brahman – the impersonal and absolutely transcendent force of the universe. In the Upanishads (thus in Vedism and Brahmanism), Brahman is the impersonal, all-pervasive spirit of the universe. Some Hindus emphasize that It is not emptiness, because It gathers all things within Itself. It is unknowable; although, on the other hand, It is the “pre-basis” of everything. Hindus also believe that It is present in every form of deity. However, despite Its *murti* (personal forms), Brahman ultimately has no attributes. It is an entity „without properties” – ineffable, immeasurable, inconceivable and amorphous. It represents a pure idea, principle, transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the teaching of Primordial Buddhism (Hinayana), from which the Theravada school – which still exists today – is derived, the Ultimate Reality is nirvana (Pali: *nibbāna*). It is the highest good of a man and means the „complete extinction” or „total annihilation” of violent desire and all passions; therefore, it is the achievement of a perfect peace of mind, supreme happiness. The Buddha spoke very little about nirvana and refused to define it. Like the monotheistic theologians following the path of negation, he preferred to explain what nirvana *was not*. Thus, he taught that it was „a realm where there is no earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air [...] No one is born there, no one departs or remains there [...] It is the end of all suffering (*dukkha*) [...] It is the non-born, the non-created, non-made [...]”<sup>6</sup>. Is nirvana the Buddhist equivalent of God? According to Steven Collins, nirvana should be understood as an unconditional, timeless and indescribable reality, which is also the ultimate purpose of all human endeavours. However, comparing it with the idea of God is inappropriate as it is nowhere referred to as “the origin or ground of the universe.”<sup>7</sup> Christopher Gowans expressed a similar opinion: “The most important are that, unlike God, Nibbana is not the ultimate cause of the universe, and it is not a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving. Hence, it is not a reality on which human beings depend or with whom they could form a personal relationship.”<sup>8</sup>

At the center of Daoism, on the other hand, there is the impersonal principle of Dao (Tao), which is the eternal and unchanging fundamental basis of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutyka w dialogu*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Das himmlische Geflecht*, 64–71.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nelson, “Krishna,” 309–328.

<sup>6</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* 63. As cited in: Thanippara, “Nirwana,” 286.

<sup>7</sup> Collins, *Nirvana*, 176–177.

<sup>8</sup> Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 151.

“Dao” literally means a “way” or a “path,” although Its semantic scope is much wider. Dao is perfectly transcendent, therefore It cannot be described or expressed with the use of terms. It is nameless as each name means something existing in a certain way. Dao, on the other hand, eludes any distinction; It is the overriding principle. Nevertheless, Its “strength” or “power” (de) manifests itself in nature, which is expressed in the order of things.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that the field of religious beliefs is highly complex, heterogeneous and incommensurable. Moreover, in many cases, the beliefs are opposed to each other and a conflict arises between them. It is reflected not only in the sphere of subjective belief, where individuals choose a particular religion, but it can also lead to social conflicts and even religious wars. “Fields of Blood,” which mark the history of religion, are a telling testimony to the above.<sup>10</sup> This raises the question of whether it is possible to create such a theory that would, on the one hand, analyze the main causes of the conflict of religious beliefs – show its social, cultural and doctrinal conditions – and, on the other hand, would indicate the way to overcome them. According to some philosophers and theologians of religion, such a theory is presented by the so-called pluralistic theology of religion. One of the main pillars of its theoretical edifice is negative or apophatic theology.

## 2. The Pluralist Hypothesis

The origins of pluralistic theology of religion (known as “pluralism” for short) date back to the 1970s and are associated with the first publications of John Hick from that period. Its main representatives – apart from Hick, who promoted the concept of the “Copernican Revolution” in theology – are Wilfred C. Smith, Paul F. Knitter, Raimon Panikkar and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, inter alia. The basic thesis of pluralism is that at the center of the world of religions, there is the unknowable and indescribable Divine Reality and religions are the space in which it is revealed in the form of personal and non-personal absolutes. Different Divine characters and different non-personal manifestations of *the sacrum* are various types of transformations of the „impact” of the Transcendent Reality on our minds. Transcendence, however, in its inner nature, stays beyond the reach of our conscious experience. It can neither be described nor understood since it goes beyond the systems of concepts and categories within which a man is capable of thinking. In that sense, it is trans-categorical, outside the scope of human perception.<sup>11</sup> One can only describe its “impact”

<sup>9</sup> Ching – Chang, “Dao,” 82.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 163.

on us. That impact is experienced, interpreted and expressed through concepts and perceptions specific to a given culture and religion. Consequently, all religions are culturally conditioned elements of one dynamic *Continuum*, and the factor that differentiates them is historical and cultural conditions. In that context, Hick quotes the Persian poet and Sufi, Rumi (1207–1273), who stated: “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same; it comes from Beyond.”<sup>12</sup>

Among the main theoretical and cognitive assumptions of the pluralistic theology of religion, the following should be mentioned: the concept of Transcendent Reality, the concept of religious experience and the specific understanding of truth and religious language.

As already mentioned, the “pluralists” assume that at the foundation of all the great religions of the world, there is one, incomprehensible and ineffable Ultimate Reality. The concept of Ultimate Reality is so broad that its content seems to go beyond not only the boundaries set for it by various theisms and philosophies related to God but also by individual religions. Also in that matter, the supporters of the pluralist option can refer to a rich philosophical and theological tradition. Karl Rahner, for example, speaks of a “mystery” that is “nameless and infinitely sacred.” That “sacred mystery” is given in the “where to” of human transcendence as “unmanageable and disposing, as inaccessible and receding away.”<sup>13</sup> In Christianity, that absolutely existing sacred mystery is called “God.”<sup>14</sup> Paul Tillich uses the term “the God above the God of theism,” which refers to an absolute faith that goes beyond the theistic objectification of God.<sup>15</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman distinguishes between “real God” and “available God” while stating that the former is “utterly unknowable X” and the latter is “essentially a mental or imaginative construct.”<sup>16</sup> Ninian Smart mentions “the noumenal Focus of religion which so to say lies behind the phenomenal Foci of religious experience and practice.”<sup>17</sup> Langdon Gilkey assumes that all religious concepts, doctrines and images of God are culturally conditioned, and therefore “no cultural logos is final and therefore universal.”<sup>18</sup> The American theologian uses such terms as: “the absolute,” “encompassing mystery,” “infinite mystery,” which are meant to designate some unspecified reality, non-relational, supra-cultural and supra-religious.<sup>19</sup> According to Gilkey, the infinite can be conceptualized as God, and God, as a symbol, can be conceptualized in relation to the mystery that transcends Him.<sup>20</sup>

12 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 153.

13 Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, 74.

14 Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, 76.

15 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 190.

16 Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 85–86.

17 Smart, “Our Experience of the Ultimate,” 24.

18 Gilkey, “Plurality,” 48.

19 Gilkey, “Plurality,” 48–49.

20 Cf. Kondrat, *Racionalność*, 265.

In the view of pluralists, such a way of understanding Ultimate Reality is a good starting point for formulating a hypothesis that the great religions of the world (Hick means the religions that emerged during and after the “Axial” era [approximately 800 to 200 BC])<sup>21</sup> – each with its own temples, spiritual practices, cultural expression, lifestyles, laws and customs, doctrines, art forms, etc. – are the result of different responses of a man to one and the same Transcendent Reality. That reality, in itself, is beyond the reach of human conceptual systems and categories. Nevertheless, it is universally present as an essential basis of our existence. Interacting with the religious aspect of human nature, it has produced – depending on culture, language and even personality conditions – both personal and non-personal foci of religious worship and meditation (gods and absolutes), which exist on a common ground connecting the Real and the human mind.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, such concepts as God, YHWH, Allah, Brahman, Vishnu, Krishna, Sunyata do not refer to different ultimate realities<sup>23</sup> but express human experiences and representations of the Real. According to Hick, all of them (personal and non-personal) are equally important and equivalent, as long as they result from the authentic attitude of believers towards Ultimate Reality.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. *Via Negativa*

The theological justification for such an interpretation of religious pluralism is provided, according to the “pluralists,” by negative (or apophatic) theology, based on which one cannot say who God *is*, but only who He *is not*.<sup>25</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the most prominent representatives of that trend, expressed the above thought as follows: “The negations respecting things Divine are true, but the affirmations are inappropriate.”<sup>26</sup> This means that anything that something can be said about is not God.<sup>27</sup> For God completely transcends human concepts, images and imagination,

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21 Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 24–25.

22 Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 100.

23 Based on the most extreme form of pluralism, referred to as “polycentric pluralism,” religions are completely separate and unrelated, each of them worshipping or responding to its own Ultimate Reality and constituting an autonomous path leading to its assumed goal. Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen*, 176.

24 See Hick, “Eine Philosophie,” 301–318.

25 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, 14, 2: “We are unable to apprehend [the divine substance] by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not.”

26 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia* II, 3.

27 Cf. von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 84: “Evagrius is the author of the expression that summarizes the entire teaching on mystical cognition, from Philo to Maximus: ‘The mind is not able to apprehend God cognitively. If it does, it is certainly not God’. [...] Maximus also says: ‘If someone claims to have seen God and know what they have seen, they have certainly seen nothing’”



and thus remains totally inexpressible, incomprehensible and indescribable.<sup>28</sup> Hence the ultimate “word” to be used to mention God should be reverent silence.<sup>29</sup>

Negative theology is not an original project of Christian thought and has its origin in Hellenistic philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Christian theology has always taught about God’s transcendence; however, the issue of God’s unknowability gained prominence only through Neoplatonic influence.<sup>31</sup> Unlike in Plato, for whom God was difficult to comprehend and impossible to express,<sup>32</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus declares that “while it is impossible to express (what God is), it is even more impossible to comprehend Him.”<sup>33</sup> The expression: *si comprehendis, non est Deus!*, taken over from the Greeks, goes from Augustine deep into the Middle Ages as: “that infinite cannot be comprehended by any mode of knowledge.”<sup>34</sup>

From the 4th century, especially from Gregory of Nyssa, negative theology becomes “the crown” of Christian theology.<sup>35</sup> Its radical form can be found in the works of the aforementioned Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom the Godhead was beyond existence and unity. “It hath no name, nor can It be grasped by the reason; It dwells in a region beyond us, where our feet cannot tread. Even the title of ‘Goodness’ we do not ascribe to It because we think such a name suitable.”<sup>36</sup>

Among the heirs of the ancient tradition of negative theology, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa are usually mentioned. In his commentary on Boethius’ treatise *De Trinitate*, Thomas Aquinas states: “God as an unknown is said to be the terminus of our knowledge in the following respect: that the mind is found to be most perfectly in possession of knowledge of God when it is recognized

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28 The concept of indescribability should be distinguished from that of incomprehensibility, most often associated with negative theology. For it is legitimate to say that since God is indescribable He is also incomprehensible. However, the incomprehensibility of God does not necessarily imply the indescribability of God. The thesis about the indescribability of God is therefore stronger than the one about the incomprehensibility of God. Cf. Kreiner, *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes*, 32.

29 It is worth noting that the thesis of the incomprehensibility or indescribability of God ultimately leads to the adoption of the thesis that the set of properties (predicates) used to refer to God is an empty set, or to the statement that every sentence such as “God is (has property) x” is a false one (a radical form of negative theology). However, if the meaning of the word “God” cannot be established at the level of concepts, the suspicion arises that the word means nothing, and theology – as critical and responsible “talk of God” – is a groundless and meaningless undertaking. See Kałuża, *Granice apofazy*, 369–392.

30 See Hadot, *Filozofia*, 239–252.

31 Hadot, *Filozofia*, 247: “It should be clearly stated that the theologians from the patristic period introduced apophatism into Christian theology using the arguments and technical vocabulary of the Neoplatonists. In particular, the influence of the Neoplatonist Proclus on the works of Dionysius the Areopagite is indisputable.”

32 Plato, *Tim.* 28 c.

33 As cited in: von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 82.

34 Augustinus, *Civ.*, XII, 18: “Neque ab hac fide me philosophorum argumenta deterrent, quorum acutissimum illud putatur, quod dicunt nulla infinita ulla scientia posse comprehendere.”

35 Hadot, *Filozofia*, 246.

36 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* XIII, 3.

that His essence is above everything that the mind is capable of apprehending in this life; and thus, although what He is remains unknown, yet it is known that He is.<sup>37</sup> Although Thomas places great emphasis on the apophatic side of his theology, he differs from Dionysius the Areopagite in the thesis that attributes expressing perfection are predicated of God “not as the cause only, but also essentially.”<sup>38</sup> That is an extremely important point as the proponents of the pluralist option often refer to the works of Thomas Aquinas to support their radical apophatism.<sup>39</sup>

Meister Eckhart also emphasizes the indescribability and unknowability of God: “If I had a God that I could get to know, I would never consider Him to be God.”<sup>40</sup> No one is able to, in the proper sense, define who God is. “God is beyond anything that can be put into words.”<sup>41</sup> Similar statements can be found in Nicholas of Cusa, who argued that no word, even “ineffable,” could be rightly attributed to God. And if He cannot be called “Nothingness,” it is because “Nothingness” is also a name. He cannot be called “something” either as the word applies only to individual entities. Thus, God is “supra Nihil et aliquid.”<sup>42</sup>

It is worth noting here that there is a significant difference between the “founding fathers” of Christian negative theology and its contemporary followers in the field of pluralistic theology of religion. For Dionysius the Areopagite, it was clear that apophatic theology was part of a broader project that included cataphatic theology, while the goal of transcending language was the glorification of God and mystical union with Him. The starting point of the “mystical apophase” is not the absolute unknowability of God (the Absolute), as the “pluralists” want, but the awareness that everything temporal that surrounds a man cannot be what they seek as it is finite and transient so it must be negated as such. In that sense, God’s transcendence precedes His immanence. However, the effort of a man in search of God – even if that search is carried out somewhat “in the dark” (cf. Acts 17:27) – cannot be deprived of objective justification as it would be no different from agnosticism capitulating at the beginning of the path.<sup>43</sup> In that sense, God’s immanence precedes His transcen-

37 Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, I, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod secundum hoc dicimur in fine nostre cognitionis Deum tamquam ignotum cognoscere, quia tunc maxime mens in cognitione profecisse inuenitur, quando cognoscit eius essentiam esse supra omne quod apprehendere potest in statu uie; et sic quamuis maneat ignotum quid est, scitur tamen quia est.”

38 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 6, corp.: “[...] huiusmodi nomina non solum dicuntur de Deo causaliter, sed etiam essentialiter. Cum enim dicitur *Deus est bonus, vel sapiens*, non solum significatur quod ipse sit causa sapientie vel bonitas, sed quod haec in eo eminentius praexistunt.”

39 E.g., Schmidt-Leukel, “Niemand hat Gott je gesehen?,” 279: “In a sense [...] Thomas and Hick agree with each other: a finite man can only get to know and experience the infinite God in a way marked by their own finitude, so the infinite essence of God remains to a man an incomprehensible mystery forever.”

40 Meister Eckhart, *Predigten*, II, 193.

41 Meister Eckhart, *Predigten*, I, 635.

42 Kolakowski, *Horror metaphysicus*, 64.

43 Cf. von Kutschera, *Vernunft und Glaube*, 73–74.

dence.<sup>44</sup> As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes: “The search has its origin in a certain pre-relation to the Sought-after, although that relation, especially in the biblical perspective, but also already on the basis of the pre-knowledge of the Seeker, contains some sort of a contradiction.”<sup>45</sup> In that context, Alois M. Haas speaks of a “mystical paradox,” where the last “word” about God (Christianity is a religion of the Word) is transformed into a reverent silence.<sup>46</sup> In Neoplatonism, as well as in Eastern religions such as Mahayana Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, that dual (paradoxical) reference to the inaccessible Absolute – total conceptual elusiveness on the one hand, and a constant, circling search that may temporarily end with “touching” and “finding” on the other hand – becomes the focal point of an increasingly ambivalent philosophy: no speculation can lead to mysticism, no mystical experience can be translated into speculation.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, as von Balthasar concludes: “if there is ‘silence’ at the end of philosophical negative theology, as the arrows of all concepts and words fall to the ground before reaching their target, there is another type of silence at the end of Christian theology: adoration that, due to the abundance of what has been given, is also breathtaking.”<sup>48</sup> The similarities and differences between the two forms of silence beyond all that can be uttered will have to be considered later on. It will be done in the context of the issue of religious experience, since it is mainly the category on which the apophatism of pluralistic theology of religion is based. The fundamental question that arises here is: how far can one go in negations without falling into logical contradictions and, above all, without losing the essential meaning of negative theology as a project of Christian theology?

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth remembering that ignorance (αγνώσια), as discussed by Dionysius the Areopagite, is not an *a priori* assumption from which reflection on God should begin. It is rather a state of mind reached through the successive stages of getting to know God. Cf. Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis*, 53–54: “Dionysius the Areopagite develops the concept of negative theology, the guiding principle of which is the belief in the unknowability and absolute transcendence of God. [...] At the same time, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, the unknowability of God is a conceptual unknowability (*‘begriffene Unerkennbarkeit’*). The assertion of God’s unknowability is not the result of ‘some vague irrationality’ (*‘einer diffusen Irrationalität’*). The statement [by Dionysius the Areopagite; KK] that God is incomprehensible, and that reason must therefore plunge into mystical ‘darkness’, is an opinion achieved through cognition and in connection with that cognition, and not an expression of agnosticism.”

<sup>45</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> See Haas, *Mystik als Aussage*, 127–171.

<sup>47</sup> See Hochstaffl, *Negative Theologie*, 65–81.

<sup>48</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 98.

#### 4. The Limits of Negation

As already mentioned, the radical form of negative theology is expressed in the belief that any sentence such as “God is x” is a false one.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, the language of religion has no cognitive value, but a pragmatic-expressive value at most, which means that its task is not to provide a man with some information about God, but to express religious feelings and arouse the appropriate attitude towards Him.<sup>50</sup> For God, in His essence, is indescribable and therefore unknowable – *Quid est Deus nescimus*.<sup>51</sup>

The metaphysical basis of the above statement is usually found in the transcendence of God, that is, in the ontological difference between God and the world, between the Creator and the creation. At first glance, that argument seems quite convincing; however, on longer reflection, it is easy to see the aporia hidden in it. Stating that type of difference presupposes exactly what is attempted to be denied on its basis, namely, the possibility of speaking of God, that is, His describability. As Peter Kügler notes: “The first problem is that by saying that ‘God is indescribable’ one actually describes Him. ‘God is indescribable’ is a description of God, therefore it is not true that God is indescribable. The sentence ‘God is indescribable’ is self-contradictory, thus it cannot be true.”<sup>52</sup> That raises the question of the logical consistency of the thesis of God’s indescribability.

Hick is also aware of this problem.<sup>53</sup> He admits that “it would indeed not make sense to say of X that *none* of our concepts apply to it. [...] For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of ‘being able to be referred to.’”<sup>54</sup> In his opinion, the property “being such that our concepts do not apply to it” cannot refer to that very property as this would lead to a contradiction.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately; however, Hick believes that those difficulties are merely “logical pedantries” that should not trouble anyone who, while constructing their theological system, refers to the statement about “ineffability of the divine nature.”<sup>56</sup>

Hick’s key argument to solve the issue of the possibility of relating concepts to Ultimate Reality that goes beyond human thought categories is to distinguish between “substantial properties, such as ‘being good’, ‘being powerful’, ‘having knowledge’, and purely formal and logically generated properties such as ‘being a referent of a term’

49 Kreiner, *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes*, 32; cf. Stace, *Time and Eternity*, 33: “To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that He is without qualities. [...] And this implies that any statement of the form ‘God is x’ is false.”

50 Cf. Werbick, *Gott verbindlich*, 84–86.

51 Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad. 11.

52 Kügler, *Übernatürlich und unbegreifbar*, 125.

53 Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239–240.

54 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

55 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

56 Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

and ‘being such that our substantial concepts do not apply.’<sup>57</sup> According to Hick, apophatic thinkers claim that no *substantial* property can be related to the essence of God/Transcendence as it is completely unknowable and inexpressible to a man. That is the role of *via negationis* (or *via remotionis*): through negative statements about God or the divine, to lead to the conviction that no positive-substantial descriptions are able to convey His essence. In that specific sense, it can be said that no substantial properties (concepts) apply to Ultimate Reality.<sup>58</sup>

Hick’s proposal is usually criticized for not specifying what exactly is the difference between the formal and substantial nature of the properties attributed to God/the Real.<sup>59</sup> In view of this apparent deficiency, Christopher J. Insole proposes to consider formal properties as those “which determine directly and solely what *other* properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject,”<sup>60</sup> stressing that this is the only information that such properties convey (e.g., “it is inappropriate to predicate color properties”). Formal properties are not; however – as Hick argues – logically generated, unless one defines God as “x to which no substantial properties apply.” Yet, also here, logical rules alone are not enough to formulate such a claim. For some knowledge of God is necessary for one to be able to say about Him that “no substantial properties apply to Him.” Consequently, it turns out that certain formal properties are attributed to God based on the knowledge of His substantial properties.<sup>61</sup> Insole thus demonstrates that to assign a formal property to God, one needs to know more about Him than when one wants to define Him using a substantial property. This is because formal properties determine which substantial properties can be attributed to an object. However, to be aware what substantial properties an object may or may not have, it is important to know (1) its ontological type (physical object, fictional, divine, etc.), (2) its ontological nature (simple, complex, personal, transcendent, immanent, etc.), our cognitive status with respect to that type of object, and (4) the type of properties that can be assigned (based on the knowledge of 1, 2, 3) to the object. The situation is different in the case of substantial properties. Here, it is not necessary to have such extensive knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Rowe, “Religious pluralism,” 139–150. William L. Rowe proposes his own terms for formal and substantial properties, formed based on the works of Hick. According to him “a formal property of the Real is some abstract characteristic the Real has that is a condition for our being able either to refer to it or to postulate it as that which is encountered through the personal deities and impersonal absolutes of the major religious traditions” (145). In turn, “a substantial property of the Real would be a property that belongs to its essential nature” (145). While doing so, Rowe criticises the statement of Hick that the Real completely goes beyond the network of human concepts. For it is impossible to utter that sentence without falling into a contradiction as the word “exceeds” used in it is also a concept. Thus, the aforementioned logical problem remains unsolved.

<sup>60</sup> Insole, “Why John Hick,” 28.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Insole, “Why John Hick,” 28–29.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Insole, “Why John Hick,” 29–30.

## 5. Experience and Language

Epistemology, which Hick makes one of the pillars of his concept of religious experience, plays a special role in justifying the pluralist hypothesis. In this regard, the British philosopher points to three main positions on the relationship between our experience of the world and the world we are aware of.<sup>63</sup>

The first position is naive realism. It is based on our natural assumption that the world around us is exactly the way we perceive it. That belief works perfectly well in practice. Over the course of evolution, our senses have evolved to register only those aspects of the environment that we need to be aware of to survive and develop. However, the world we experience is actually only a small part of the whole being discovered by natural science. We hear only a small part of the sound scale – some animals are able to hear sounds above or below our hearing threshold. We also fail to capture most of the chemical differences in our environment. We are simply aware of the form of the world around us that suits our needs as the organisms that we are: formed by our inherited niche, both on a macro and a micro scale.<sup>64</sup>

The opposing position is “idealism,” according to which the world we perceive exists only in *our* minds (or rather, in *my* mind, since others are also part of the world I perceive). The sophist Gorgias (c. 480–385 BC) is considered the founder of that view. Of a similar opinion, but without a solipsistic conclusion, was George Berkeley (1685–1753). That Anglican bishop and scholar claimed that there was a God, independent of our mind, who imposed our perceptions on us, guaranteeing their continuity and coherence at the same time. Since those perceptions are ordered, we call them the order of nature<sup>65</sup>.

The third position, advocated by Hick, is a middle approach called critical realism<sup>66</sup>. The prominent thinker of the modern era, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), is considered its precursor. The German philosopher affirmed the existence of a reality independent of us (realism), recognizing at the same time that it was not given to us in itself, i.e. outside of experience, but only in such a way that the innate structure of the human mind was capable of showing the influence of that reality on the consciousness of a man, that is, in the form of phenomena (critical realism). In other words, we are not able to know things the way they are. We only know phenomena, i.e. the objects within the field of experience. Things-in-themselves are outside the field of experience, they are not phenomena but, as Kant says, noumena (from Greek νοούμενον, “something that is only conceived, imagined”). Therefore, we are not able to get to know them<sup>67</sup>. Consequently, Kant speaks of a “Copernican revolution,”

63 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 137–140.

64 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 137.

65 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 128; 137–138.

66 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 138; cf. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 57–59.

67 Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 307.

to which leads the concept of cognition proposed by him: there is no object without a subject since the subject is the condition of its cognition.<sup>68</sup> To put it differently, the object is “constructed” or “constituted” (Edmund Husserl) by the subject from the impressions that come from it. According to Hick, that view is confirmed by modern sciences, especially cognitive psychology and sociology of knowledge, as well as quantum physics.<sup>69</sup> However, the basis of that idea was expressed centuries earlier by Thomas Aquinas in his statement: “The things known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”<sup>70</sup>

Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal world and the world of noumena is of a philosophical nature; however, formally, it is strikingly reminiscent of Neoplatonic apophaticism (Plotinus, Proclus, Damascius), according to which an absolute principle cannot be the subject of knowledge.<sup>71</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Hick makes the above one of the basic assumptions of his concept of religious experience. The British philosopher says directly: “the Transcendent is the noumenal reality of which the humanly thought and experienced objects of devotion are the phenomenal manifestations.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore “the different [religious; KK] traditions are not reporting experiences of the Real in itself, but of its different manifestations within human consciousness.”<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere, Hick says that the various divine personages and the various impersonal manifestations of the *sacrum* are „different transformations of the impact upon us of the ultimately Real,”<sup>74</sup> meaning that “impact” is not to be understood in the literal sense (one body comes into contact with another one and thus affects it) but that there is an “aspect” within us which is “in tune” with the Transcendent. That aspect is like the image of God within us; or the “divine spark” – mentioned by Meister Eckhart; or the atman that we all are in our deepest nature; or the universal nature of Buddha within us.<sup>75</sup> It is that aspect of our being that is affected by the Real to the extent that we are open to that reality.

Therefore, Ultimate Reality, being itself beyond the reach of conscious human experience, does not fit into any systems of concepts within which we are capable of thinking. In a key passage on that issue, Hick states: “It follows from this distinction

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B XVI–XVII.

<sup>69</sup> Nadeau – Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe*, 41: “In quantum physics, observational conditions and results are such that we cannot presume a categorical distinction between the observer and the observing apparatus, or between the mind of the physicist and the results of physical experiments. The measuring apparatus and the existence of an observer are essential aspects of the act of observation.”

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2: “Cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis.” Hick quotes that statement of Thomas Aquinas very often, e.g., Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 240–241; Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 163; Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 69.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Damascius, *Dubitaciones et solutiones* 7 (Ruelle, I, 11): “We prove our ignorance and the impossibility of talking about it.” As cited in: Hadot, *Filozofia*, 246.

<sup>72</sup> Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

<sup>73</sup> Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

<sup>74</sup> Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 66.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 67.

between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its personae and impersonae. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable ground of that realm.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the British philosopher argues that the Real is the primal basis and source of the properties that *actually* apply to the *manifestations* of the ineffable Transcendent Reality, to the personal and non-personal „absolutes” that are the particular objects of worship, meditation, and mystical experience. Those objects are not fiction or pure human projection but are *authentic* manifestations of the Transcendent both inside and outside of us, deep within our being and within the religious communities where which they are worshipped.<sup>77</sup>

Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, maintained in the presented form, aroused many controversies among both philosophers and theologians. While there is a general agreement on the postulate of the existence of one Ultimate Reality, the question of its nature turns out to be a considerable problem.<sup>78</sup> Kenneth Surin, for example, sees a serious difficulty in any attempt to formulate a trans-religious definition of God. In his opinion, the elimination of confessional elements in such an approach poses a threat of distortion of fundamental religious ideas<sup>79</sup>. In turn, Harold A. Netland asks: “Given Hick’s contention that the Real *an sich* transcends even distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong [...], what sense does it make to speak of an ethical criterion for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate dispositional responses to the Real?”<sup>80</sup>

However, interpreting religious experience based on Kant’s distinction „noumenon” – „phenomenon” leads primarily to considerable theoretical-cognitive difficulties. As Armin Kreiner notes, the very distinction between the object „a” and its experience as „ $\varphi$ ” may be meaningful; however, how does one know that  $a = \varphi$  (in the sense: „a” is the *authentic* experience of „ $\varphi$ ”)? The answer may be: if there are no rational reasons to question the validity of that equation, it can be assumed that indeed  $a = \varphi$ . We are also entitled to assume that someone else sees „a” as „ $\delta$ .” If there is no reason to doubt the veracity of that person’s experience of „a” as „ $\delta$ ,” in that case,  $a = \delta$ . However, it is not true that  $a = \varphi$  and  $a = \delta$ . The truth of a sentence is something other than a rational belief in its truth, hence there may be mutually exclusive beliefs that will be the subject of rational belief. However, as long as the contents of

<sup>76</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246; cf. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 169.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 247.

<sup>78</sup> Kondrat, *Racjonalność*, 271–272.

<sup>79</sup> Surin, “Revelation,” 340.

<sup>80</sup> Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 227.



those beliefs contradict each other, they cannot be true at the same time.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the pluralistic hypothesis promoted by Hick – that the same noumenal reality corresponds to different experiences of Transcendent Reality – separates the noumenon (“God in himself”) from the phenomenon (“God for me”) so much that it is impossible to ultimately verify whether a given religious experience is really a “dialogue with reality” (Richard Schaeffler) or merely a projection.<sup>82</sup> Hence the critical questions: How can “a” be *authentically* experienced as „φ” when „a in itself” is not „φ”? How can the interpretation of „a” as „φ” become a catalyst for salvific action consisting in the transformation of self-centered existence (*self-centredness*) into God’s reality-centered existence (*Reality-centredness*) if „a in itself” is not the same as „φ”? According to Kreiner, the main epistemological problem that the pluralistic hypothesis must face is directly related to the mysterious nature of the Ultimate Reality. „The more radically and consistently the ineffability of the incomprehensibility of the Transcendent is emphasised, the more convincing the pluralistic hypothesis developed by Hick will appear. And vice versa – the more optimistic the cognitive possibilities (as opposed to the possibility of experience) of the human spirit are assessed in relation to God’s reality, the less credible the aforementioned hypothesis will seem.”<sup>83</sup>

## 6. The Nature of Transcendence

The dispute over the limits of negation is in fact a dispute over the nature of Transcendence. As mentioned, in Christianity, apophatic theology is part of a broader project, a part of which is also cataphatic theology. The indispensability of positive theology results, among other things, from the need to preserve semantic rules. For if we say that the object of religious reference is an incomprehensible and ineffable Mystery, we must first know what kind of reality we are talking about to be able to attribute such properties to it. As Peter Byrne aptly observes: “We know enough to know we cannot comprehend the transcendent.”<sup>84</sup> Therefore, the Ultimate Reality that religions speak of cannot be an absolutely “unknowable X,” some arbitrary “something” to which such properties as “unknowability,” “indescribability” or “ineffability” are randomly assigned. Otherwise, negative theology will necessarily lead to religious nihilism or even atheism.<sup>85</sup> Especially from the perspective of faith, the word “God” is not just a nameless cipher of infinite Transcendence, but the One who can be called by name, to whom one can say, “*Elohejnu*

81 Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 128.

82 Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 129.

83 Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 131.

84 Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*, 141.

85 Scheler, *Problemy religii*, 108.

*we-Elohej-abothejnu*” – „Thou, our God and God of our fathers.” Thus, whoever believes is aware of what and who they believe in.<sup>86</sup>

From the biblical perspective, God’s transcendence is related to His immanence. The theology of the chosen people is not speculative in nature, but it was born from the experience of God present in their midst and acting in their history. The Hebrews experienced God’s immanence and at the same time, as part of that experience, discovered that God is transcendent, i.e. completely different from the order in which He acts. God’s otherness in relation to the creation is indicated primarily by His names: El Elyôn (“God Most High”), El Olam (“Everlasting God”), El Shaddai (“God Almighty”), Abir (“Mighty One”), Adônai (“Lord”), Yahweh Sabaoth (“Lord of Hosts”). Especially as YHWH (“I am he who is” or “I am the one who exists”<sup>87</sup>), God remains a “mystery” – a “Wholly Other.”<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, the names indicate God’s presence and activity in the world. This is also the essential difference between the God of the Bible and the God of Greek philosophy. For the Greeks, God can abide in his transcendent nature, and thus in His true divinity, if He remains outside finite reality and is inaccessible to it. Consequently, the God of philosophy does not know that something else exists, and therefore never acts in the cosmos (Aristotle), or only enters into a relationship with it through the mediation of lower beings – Demiurge, Nous or Logos (Platonism) – thus protecting His transcendence. This Greek way of looking at transcendence never entered the Hebrew understanding of God, precisely because the Israelites’ understanding of God’s otherness was born out of the experience of His real presence among them, His action in time and history.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, the relationship of God’s immanence to transcendence (and vice versa) is not arbitrary. As Thomas G. Weinandy aptly notes: “From within biblical revelation then, the immanence of God takes epistemological precedence. It is only because God first revealed himself within the created order, within time and history, that he came to be known as someone who, in some sense, is transcendent.”<sup>90</sup> In turn, ontic precedence falls to the transcendence of God: “God revealed himself within time and history, and thus came to be known, only because he is the kind of God he is, that is, as one who is transcendent, and yet, capable of acting within the historical lives of persons and nations.”<sup>91</sup> The nature of God’s immanence is

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Wendel, *Gott*, 93.

<sup>87</sup> Samuel Terrien (*The Elusive Presence*, 119) prefers another translation of God’s name: “I shall be whoever I shall be” – and formulates a conclusion: “According to this interpretation, the name indeed carries the connotation of divine presence, but it also confers upon this presence a quality of elusiveness. The God of biblical faith, even in the midst of a theophany, is at once *Deus revelatus atque absconditus*. He is known as unknown.”

<sup>88</sup> On the biblical theology of God’s names, see Feldmeier – Spieckermann, *Der Gott der Lebendigen*, 17–52.

<sup>89</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 44.

<sup>90</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42.

<sup>91</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42.

therefore dependent on the nature of God's transcendence, which the Hebrew people came to know through God's presence and activity in the world. This statement not only rules out radical apophaticism, but also guarantees the unity of the object of religious reference. "While there is an epistemological priority in the manner in which God is known and an ontological priority in the manner in which God is, and so can be known, the God who is transcendent is the same God who is immanent and vice-versa."<sup>92</sup>

Ultimately, as Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas teach, the way to God must be threefold: the way of causality (*via causalitatis*), the way of negation (*via negativa*) and the way of eminence (*via eminentiae*). If we grant God ontological precedence as the Ultimate Reality, then the direct conclusions that follow from this run along *via negativa*. This is because the First Cause, which creation theology identifies with the God of faith, must be completely different from everything else: it must be transcendent to all the features of the world that testify to metaphysical limitations and imperfections. Therefore, *via causalitas* (which is the starting point of theological reflection, as it allows us to establish the ontological relationship between God and the world) leads directly to *via negativa* as the negation of everything that is incompatible with God as First Cause and Pure Act. However, negative judgments about God are made on the basis of previous positive claims about God's metaphysical primacy. This means that *via negativa* logically presupposes the minimal positive knowledge required by *via causalitas*; otherwise, the negation process would be incoherent, since there would be no basis for determining what must be negated about God.<sup>93</sup>

From the point of view of Christian theology, the impassable boundary of apophaticism is Christology. This is because the essence of the Christian confession of faith in Jesus as Christ is contained in the conviction that in Him – in His words and deeds – God *himself* has given himself to man as absolute, irrevocable and imperishable love (ἀγάπη). Jesus – in all the glory of His personal being – was actually (and not just symbolically or metaphorically) the „place” of the historically concretized presence of God-Agápē. If, therefore, in Christ God has revealed himself to man, then negation cannot be the last word in theology. For negation is impossible to love – *Negationes non summe amamus*.<sup>94</sup> This, of course, does not mean that God's *self*-revelation in Christ makes God henceforth cease to be a „hidden God” (*Deus absconditus*). Even the highest theophany, which is the Incarnation of the Word, cannot

<sup>92</sup> Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42. Weinandy emphasizes that the Hebrews believed that the God they experienced, who entered into a relationship with them and acted in their midst, was God as He truly is, not some stripped-down revelation tailored to human capabilities. This statement is radically different from the one made by Hick as part of his interpretation of religious pluralism.

<sup>93</sup> Shanley, *The Thomist Tradition*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Ioannis Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, dist. III, pars I, q. 2, a. 10: „Negationes etiam tantum, non summe amamus.”

deprive God of His mystery. In this sense, negative theology still retains its value; however, its place, function and reach within the Christian doctrine of God remain an open question.<sup>95</sup>

## 7. Toward a Trinitarian Interpretation of Religious Pluralism

It seems that a good “base theory” for an adequate interpretation of religious pluralism is Trinitarian theology.<sup>96</sup> Not only does it allow for the integration of the various images and concepts of Ultimate Reality present in different religions, but it additionally takes into account the tension that exists between positive (cataphatic) theology and negative (apophatic) theology. This does not mean, of course, that all religions feature some kind of “pre-phenomenon” of Trinitarian faith through which they could achieve a kind of supra-religious unity. The point is merely that different images and concepts of God, as well as the way of experiencing the relationship with Him, are given different forms depending on which of the Persons of the Trinity they are specifically oriented towards. It seems that such different understandings and approaches to the mystery of God have surprising counterparts in the great religions of the world.<sup>97</sup> Following this pattern, one can distinguish three basic types of religious experience and the corresponding concepts of God or Ultimate Reality.<sup>98</sup>

The first type of religious experience portrays God as an unfathomable mystery, eluding human cognition and conceptualization. God is “Wholly Other,” infinite, “nameless.” No one can behold His face. One can even say: God *is not*, He has „no *ex-sistentia*, not even being.”<sup>99</sup> For since He is the source of all being, He alone cannot be it. In this sense, He is “Nothingness,” “Beyond-Being” – a reality that cannot be defined by any concepts or images, as it transcends all possible categories.

Such an approach is characteristic especially of the so-called apophatic religions, according to which the Ultimate Reality is in such absolute transcendence that it is

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Kałuża, “Jezus jako obraz Nieprzedstawialnego,” 115–116.

<sup>96</sup> See Bernhardt, “Trinitätstheologie,” 287–301; Bernhardt, *Monotheismus und Trinität*, 290–322; Kałuża, “Teologia trynitarna,” 277–312.

<sup>97</sup> Raimon Panikkar (*Das Göttliche in Allem*, 55) talks of “homeomorphic equivalencies” that determine the similarities between religions. Of course, indicating the existence of such similarities or analogies calls for more detailed analyses based on empirical material (holy books, works of theologians and religious thinkers, the world of symbols, rituals, liturgies, etc.), which could confirm the thesis promoted here. This study does not have the space for such analyses. It is worth adding that the traditionally practiced theology of religion is today increasingly being supplanted by so-called comparative theology which, by definition, takes into account the results of religious studies. See Kałuża, “Czy teologia komparatywna zastąpi teologię religii?,” 319–358.

<sup>98</sup> See Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 506–511; Kessler, “Religiöse Grunderfahrungen,” 28–51; Kałuża, “Między ekskluzywizmem a pluralizmem,” 32–37.

<sup>99</sup> Panikkar, *Trinität*, 74.

only possible to speak of it in a negative form. Here one can point to the Buddhist experience of nirvana, as well as the special mystical experience present in many of the world's religions, where the last word about God is reverent silence. Trinitarian theology points here to the mystery of the *Father*. The Father is not only the infinitely remote primordial source of all creatures but also the Trinitarian divine being. He is „the incomprehensible, bottomless mystery of self-giving.”<sup>100</sup> It is in this sense that He is „silence.”

The second type of religious experience captures God as a (transcendent) Person, emerging from the abyss of silence and speaking to man. God is someone “with whom it is possible to speak, engage in a dialog, establish a connection [...]; He is the Divine ‘You’ who is in relation, or better: He is a relation to man and one of the poles of his entire existence.”<sup>101</sup> God acts and creates; through Him, everything happened; in Him, all things have their beginning. Above all, however, He is the God of revelation, the God who can be called by name.

This way of understanding Ultimate Reality is characteristic of theism, and its differing realizations can be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. What is important here is the opportunity to establish a “personal relationship” with God (e.g. through prayer) and to walk the path He has set for us. Trinitarian theology points here to the Person of the Son.<sup>102</sup>

The third type of religious experience captures God as “the interior of all being.”<sup>103</sup> The word “interior” here means the innermost whole, in which God and the cosmos – thus everything – form a unity. In this context, Raimon Panikkar speaks of “cosmotheandric” reality, which he sees, among other things, in the experience of *advaita* (nonduality) and in the hymnal formula *saccidānanda*, which describes the essence of Brahman.<sup>104</sup> From the point of view of Trinitarian theology, it is possible to say: “God is the deep, inner heart of all being, that ‘point’ where all particularisms, differences and ‘self-existences’ are overcome and made familiar.”<sup>105</sup> This image of Ultimate Reality is mainly inherent in Far Eastern religions. In the West, we find it in some strands of mysticism, especially where the main role is not so much a dialogue with God, but a “consciousness” of immersion in the immeasurable depths of the Absolute, and even losing oneself in it (e.g. Meister Eckhart).

Christian Trinitarian theology points here to the mystery of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who creates the bond between the Persons of the Trinity and creation. In Him all differences become one. If the Father is the source and the Son is the stream flowing from Him, then the Spirit is “the ultimate end, the measureless

<sup>100</sup> Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 35.

<sup>101</sup> Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 508.

<sup>102</sup> Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 92–93.

<sup>103</sup> Panikkar, *Trinität*, 88.

<sup>104</sup> See Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, 54–77.

<sup>105</sup> Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 93.

ocean in which the river of divine life reaches its full perfection, quietyens and completes itself [...]. There can be no ‘personal relationship’ to the Spirit [...].”<sup>106</sup> Entering the path of the Spirit, we reach the extra-ontic foundation of all things. Therefore, contemplation *in* the Spirit is devoid of all intellectual content – it is beyond all categories.

Thus understood, the model of the Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism undoubtedly has its advantages. First and foremost, it helps integrate the different images and concepts of Ultimate Reality present in the world’s various religions. The inclusion of negative theology, which is integral to this model (mainly within the first and third types of religious experience), further demonstrates that non-personal concepts of the Absolute characteristic of the so-called apophatic religions (some strands of Hinduism, early Buddhism, Taoism and others) need not be regarded as contradictory to the personal concepts inherent in the so-called prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Moreover, it turns out that also within prophetic traditions, such as Christianity, one can find non-personal concepts of Ultimate Reality (e.g. Meister Eckhart) that do not necessarily conflict with the personal concept that dominates the tradition. A similar phenomenon can be observed in some apophatic traditions, such as Buddhism, which also developed personal forms of religious reference later in its development (e.g. amidism). Perry Schmidt-Leukel, who has analyzed this phenomenon in detail, has proposed a fractal concept for interpreting religious pluralism in this context. At its center is the belief that typological distinctions, by which differences between religions are defined, are often found in modified form within the same religious tradition. Religions are thus neither the same nor radically different; rather, they are similar precisely in their internal differentiation.<sup>107</sup> This is undoubtedly an original and interesting way of looking at the diversity of religions, but nevertheless, in the opinion of the author, it is not sufficient to provide a theologically legitimate (and not just formally adequate) explanation of the similarities between religions. The Trinitarian perspective seems more promising here, especially since it takes into account the Christian interpretation of Ultimate Reality, thus avoiding the creation of a kind of “global theology,” unrelated to any particular religious tradition.<sup>108</sup>

More broadly, the model for interpreting religious pluralism proposed here fits into the paradigm of open inclusivism. It makes it possible, on the one hand, to talk about the true knowledge of God/Ultimate Reality in non-Christian religions, and, on the other hand, provides an opportunity to positively evaluate these religions against the backdrop of a single, albeit internally diverse and multifaceted salvation history. The differences between religions are not merely the expression of cultural

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<sup>106</sup> Panikkar, *Trinität*, 92–93.

<sup>107</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, “Eine fraktale Interpretation,” 134–150.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Hick, “Straightening the Record,” 190.

differences and the result of a more or less arbitrary interpretation of always already conditioned religious experience, whose “object” (God, the Absolute, the Real) in itself is unknowable and indescribable, but have their origin in God himself, who “at many times and in various ways” (Heb 1:1) spoke to man, revealing himself and His saving intentions to him. While such an understanding of plurality and diversity is not immune to the temptation of syncretism and relativism, in principle it provides a good foundation for developing an open yet deeply Christian hermeneutics of religious pluralism.

## Conclusions

Different religions have different concepts of Ultimate Reality. In some of them, it is understood personally as YHWH, God or Allah, in others non-personally as Brahman, Nirvana or Tao (and many other examples). This diversity often leads to conflicting religious beliefs. This conflict is revealed not only in the realm of objective belief, which concerns the meaning of religious language and the basic structure and ways of justifying religious claims, but also in the realm of subjective belief, which concerns the situations in which individuals make a decision about their choice of a particular religion. This fact can also be an obstacle to interreligious dialogue and, in extreme cases, become the cause of doctrinal conflicts. Therefore, an increasing number of theologians and philosophers of religion raise the question of the theoretical possibility of partially overcoming the conflict of religious beliefs by formulating appropriate assumptions, theses, claims and postulates that make it possible, on the one hand, to understand the essence and genesis of religious pluralism, and on the other hand, to build a theoretical basis for dialogue and exchange of spiritual experiences between religions.

One such proposal is the pluralistic theology of religion. Its representatives are convinced that the plurality of religions is the result of different human reactions to one and the same Transcendent Reality. This reality, in itself, is beyond the reach of human conceptual systems and categories, and can therefore be understood and interpreted differently. Consequently, concepts such as God, YHWH, Allah, Brahman, Vishnu, Krishna, Sunyata, do not refer to different ultimate realities but express human experiences and representations of the Real. According to the “pluralists,” all of them (personal and non-personal) are equally important and equivalent, as long as they result from the authentic attitude of believers towards the Real. Among the arguments to justify this view of religions, a special place is given to negative theology. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the “founding fathers” of Christian negative theology and its contemporary followers in the field of pluralistic theology of religion. For Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas, it was

clear that apophatic theology was part of a broader project that included cataphatic theology, while the goal of transcending language was the glorification of God and mystical union with Him. Meanwhile, “pluralists” so separate God’s transcendence (“God in himself”; νοούμενον) from God’s immanence (“God for us”; φαινόμενον) that they are forced to reject any possibility of knowing God as He really *is*. In this perspective, speaking of divine revelation as *self-revelation* (in the sense of *autorevelatio et autodonatio*) becomes essentially impossible. Hick makes no reference at all to the concept of revelation, which presupposes the ability of Ultimate Reality to act intentionally (and thus its *de facto* personal character). Instead, he seeks to justify „that there is an inbuilt human capacity to be aware of the universal presence of the Transcendent, in virtue of its immanence within our own nature [...] which is, however, always manifested in particular culturally and historically conditioned ways.”<sup>109</sup> As a result, the various religious traditions do not describe the experiences of the Real in itself, but its various manifestations in human consciousness.<sup>110</sup>

From the point of view of Christian theology, the impassable boundary of apophaticism is Christology. This is because the essence of Christian belief in Jesus *as* Christ is contained in the conviction that in Him – in His life, death and resurrection – God *himself* has given himself to man as unconditional, irrevocable and imperishable love. Consequently, Jesus is not just a „symbol of God” (Roger Haight), but the „place” (sacrament) of his real *self-giving* to man. With all this in mind, the article proposed a different direction for interpreting religious pluralism. Its basis is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Importantly, Trinitarian dogma also takes into account the mysterious nature of the Ultimate Reality, but apophaticism is here integrated into the broader framework of revelation theology, so that God’s transcendence is not separated from His immanence. Adopting this kind of bipolarity is necessary to maintain the integrity of Christology, without which one cannot talk of the uniqueness of Christianity as a fully revealed and salvific religion.

Contemporary theology of religion is familiar with various models of Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism.<sup>111</sup> The model presented here can be called the integrative model. It is based on the assumption that it is possible to demonstrate certain similarities between the properties of the individual Persons of the Trinity and various ideas and concepts of Ultimate Reality found in different religions. Such a synthesis does not necessarily have to lead to a syncretic combination of different images of God or paths to God, but can be seen as an invitation to see the “absolute” and the “unconditional” in the perspective of the three dimensions that are revealed in every authentic religious experience. This is possible because, according to the Christian faith, God *himself* has appeared in this way and allowed himself to be

<sup>109</sup> Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 164.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

<sup>111</sup> Kałuża, “Teologia trynitarna,” 281.



experienced. Consequently, interreligious dialogue need not be limited to showing differences between religions as having their justification in Trinitarian differences, but it can lead to the discovery of the mutual perichoresis of the three fundamental images of God/Ultimate Reality to which religions bear witness, and provide encouragement to realise them within one's own spiritual and religious tradition.

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