

Assess the meaning of Apophatism according to the Areopagites treatise on 'mystical theology'.

Introduction

Mystical Theology for the Fathers provides "the context for a direct apprehension of God who has revealed in Christ and dwells with us through the Holy Spirit."¹ Each father in accordance with their understanding and within the context of his own time responded to a particular problem confronting the Church that demanded their respective attention. Thus each Father, in truth, wrote of their particular vision and a catena of writings grew that linked and yet progressed the vision of God and his intervention in history.

To use a metaphor: the vision of God is like a statue carved out of stone. Each particular father through his work picks up the sculptors tools to remove some obstacle towards revealing the vision and thus "show up the beauty which is hidden".² Each Father of course did not carry on towards revelation of the vision on the area immediately previously worked on, but on the area as demanded by the times, yet for all that each Father contributed towards revealing what vision that is, in truth, a perpetual work in progress. Further each Father's handiwork is manifest in the emerging work with their contribution vital towards that shape.

There is thus an orderly continuous emergence of the vision that develops in the soul through desire, yearning and love as it strives to return to God as the Beautiful and Good for "all being derives from, exists in and is returned towards the Beautiful and the Good."³

One Father known to history as Dionysius the Areopagite, shatters the natural order and progression of the above scheme. Orthodox tradition formally identifies him as the convert of St Paul⁴ who became the first Bishop of Athens, the author of the Areopagitica, martyred in Paris in 96AD and who is commemorated in the calendar of Saints on the 3rd October. This essay will focus and assess the meaning of apophatism according to the Areopagites treatise on Mystical Theology that is attributed as the work of this father.

The Man and His Times

Dionysius the Areopagite through his corpus conveys certain information about himself to establish his sub-apostolic authority. The author states claim that his name is Dionysius⁵ who was initiated into theology by St Paul,⁶ a correspondent with St John,⁷ who associated with St James and St Peter⁸ and who witnessed the solar eclipse at Helipolos when the saviour was put to the cross.⁹

On the other hand the corpus reveals incongruity in its historicity. Whilst other Christian writers at the end of the first century were struggling to express some comprehension of the God-man event, Dionysius produced a body of writings that were profound, deeply mystical and totally beyond what had been written to that point. Further the works assume an evolved practice of Monasticism¹⁰ which assumed a fixed canon of the New Testament and contain accounts of baptism and Eucharist rites reflective of a 5th Century understanding of both mysteries.

The received Corpus further makes reference to other "works" of the author either lost or fictitious which have a place in the overall comprehension of the corpus. This "Symbolic Theology" supposedly dealt with biblical symbols for God taken from the

realm of sense perception as God descends to plurality.¹¹ ... His "Theological representations" that showed the sense in which God can be said to be one then triune¹² "Concerning Justice and the Judgment of God" that dealt with the wisdom of Gods Judgment.¹³ ... "Divine Hymns" that set out the praises sung by the celestial hierarchies.¹⁴... "The Conceptual and the Perceptible" supposedly dealt with the methods of how each being is uplifted as far as can be to the contemplation of what is "divine."¹⁵ "The Properties and Ranks of the Angels" dealt with how hierarchies remain constant in their desire to see God¹⁶ and "The Soul" deals with how creatures can participate in the good.¹⁷

Dionysius also makes reference to his supposed teacher Hierothus and to two of his alleged works. His "Hymns of Yearning" were relied upon by Dionysius as authority for the proposition that it is a unifying and co-mingling that "makes the superior to provide for the subordinate, peer to be in communion with peer and subordinate to return to superior".¹⁸ Further, Dionysius utilizes his "Elements of Theology" to explain the divinity of Jesus as the fulfilling cause of all".¹⁹

The Dionysian Corpus thus provoked and continues to provoke Christian consciousness to a level beyond the writings themselves. Questions such as the nature of truth and truth function as well as authenticity and Tradition within the Church are impacted upon by the fact that the author who claimed to be the Areopagite referred to in the Acts of the Apostles.

So Who was the Areopagite?

The author of the Areopagica is unknown to history. The terminus a quo appears to be the mid to late fifth century and the terminus ad quem to 513 when the monophysite

Severus of Antioch referred to the Corpus.²⁰ The consensus of academic opinion n appears that "one should seek his homeland in the East and in Syria rather than Egypt".²¹ Chadwick takes the view that "about 500 - 510 a moderate monophysite, deeply influenced by the Neo-Platonism of the pagan Proclus of Athens, put into circulation some writings on mystical theology under the name of St Paul's Athenian Convert, Dionysius the Areopagite."²²

The placement of at least the publication of the Divine Names after Proclus' publication of his work "De Malorur Subsistentia" as it is, strongly paralleled in the Areopagite treatment of evil.

Dionysius wrote at the time of the Christological controversy, subsequent to Chalcedon (451) had enveloped the Church, especially in the East. In that milieu Dionysius' focus was deeply liturgical, scriptural and centered in the community of the Church. It was this attempt at explaining how humanity participates in the process of being deified through Christ in the context of the unity of God that prompted Dionysius to espouse his vision of God through his Corpus.

The Hermeneutic of the Areopagite

In order to gain understanding of the Areopagite, it is necessary to consider his hermeneutic that he manifests especially in his Epistles. Dionysius makes the cardinal point that God at all times remains beyond light and knowledge and is completely unknown and hidden from his creatures.²³ Further God who is the source of all goodness transcends goodness and divinity however his goodness and divinity imitates him.²⁴ Jesus who was neither human or non-human, although humanly born and far superior to men, accomplished in our midst the activity of God-man.²⁵ Further

this intervention by Christ is sudden and reveals his humanity whilst still hidden as God.²⁶ Yet, despite the appearance of Christ, God continues to be beyond all conception of his creature.²⁷ Dionysius also warned that an affirmation is not necessarily the opposite of a negation. That is no negation necessarily implies as correct the converse proposition that "what" is not a horse is not necessarily human.²⁸

To those propositions must be added that the Areopagite aimed at the fullness of truth and that once the truth has been spotlessly established anything else is "specious rather than authentic."²⁹ Further, profane knowledge had only one function, namely to bring humanity closer to God. Dionysius saw within the Church the need for hierarchical order thus everyone must think about their rightful place, which place imposed responsibilities upon the member of that hierarchy in accordance with their particular order.³⁰ Finally knowledge of God can be apprehended by liturgical or biblical symbols which serve to both protect the divine from the hoi polloi and at the same time, reveal divine truth. Also, God's providence, which proceeds out of itself cares for us all.³¹

The Dionysius Corpus

The Areopagitica comprises of four Treasures and ten letters. The Celestial Hierarchy focuses on the structure of the Angelic world. The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy focuses on the liturgical and ecclesial structure of the World. The Divine Names focuses catopically on the divine participation of humanity and the Mystical Theology on deification and apophetic knowledge of God. The focus now is on the Mystical Theology which Rorem describes as the key to understanding of the Dionysian method the structure of the entire corpus.³²

The Mystical Theology

In Dionysian vocabulary mystery means mysterious or hidden whilst theology means the Word of God. Thus the title of this short essay means in effect the mysterious or hidden Word of God.

This remarkable book "The Importance of which for the whole history of Christian thought cannot be exaggerated"³³ is addressed to Timothy "my friend"³⁴ and consists of five small chapters. The chapter headings appear to be later interpolations and are unnecessary to follow the flow of the work.

The Mystical Theology begins unlike the other treatises, with a prayer which is fascinating as it incorporates a number of names and words that have been discussed in the Divine Names, a treatise devoted to the special names used for God. The prayer begins, "Trinity" Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness.³⁵

Dionysius thus introduces a number of divine names that are expanded upon elsewhere in his works, although warning not to apply words or concepts to the hidden transcendent God.³⁶ Dionysius with the next breath makes plain that "we can only use what scripture has disclosed."³⁷ Dionysius thus firmly grounds his theology in what has been revealed to man by God. The first theological term that is thus used is for the "One who is beyond all things"³⁸ is Trinity.

The concept of Trinity to the Church posed significant problems of balance between tritheism on the one hand and modalism on the other. Dionysius who uses Trinity as the apogee of revelation³⁹ makes plain that there is no place for ontology in God as God cannot be known in his essence which is beyond any intelligence but through his manifestation and hence through his desire to be known. For Dionysius, God belongs concurrently to ultimate reality which is "simple absolute and unchangeable"⁴⁰ and

manifest."⁴¹ Thus Dionysius teaches, according to Rolt, "that God is but an appearance of the Absolute. This is after all, merely a bold way of stating the orthodox tritium that the ultimate Godhead is incomprehensible."⁴² Thus, to creation, Uncreated Being is manifested by the absolute Godhead which is absolutely stable and unknowable.

Dionysius also introduces the idea of Being which is the first gift of the absolute and transcendent God. Goodness is praised from all as all have a share in Being.⁴³ Thus Being is seen as the primary gift from the incomprehensible God that is comprehended by the ability of creation to participate in its capacity towards that gift. Thus although a man and a mouse share in Being, their participation is in accordance with their respective abilities to respond to that Being. Thus order exists in creation with humanity having the greatest ability to participate in Being, after Celestial Beings.

Further the prayer contemplates upward movement of God's creation "beyond unknowing and light up to the furthest highest peak of mystic scripture."⁴⁴ This movement is both upwards and towards God. Movement of the soul is circular and occurs within itself to contemplate the beautiful and good. Once enlightened according to its capacity, then each soul moves spirally and in a straight line from "external things, as from certain variegated and pluralized symbols, to the simple united contemplation."⁴⁵ This Dionysius has in his mind, the ability of the soul to move toward the highest extent possible, through scripture to where Gods words "completely fill our sightless mind with treasures beyond all beauty."⁴⁶ Even at the limit of human knowledge where man strives to understand, God is unseen and unsensed and hence always beyond the comprehension of man.

Does this mean that man cannot have, in the mind of Dionysius, union with God? The answer is emphatically that humanity can do so provided that all sense, perception and mental concepts are left behind "by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all."⁴⁷ Thus although humanity cannot through comprehension achieve union, through the extent of the soul, each soul is capable to "stand outside of everything which is correlative to its own finite nature. Thus the soul leaves behind all reason and knowledge and is brought into union with God himself to the extent that every one of us is capable of it."⁴⁸

The point that Dionysius makes that this knowledge is not for the uninformed and especially for those who foolishly think that they can capture the vision of God through their own efforts. It is thus not the creature through their own intellectual power that can cross the abyss but rather a gift from God that can only be arrived at after everything that can be affirmed is negated and thereafter all that is negated is left behind as the soul encounters silence and awe in the experience of God.

Dionysius, as paradigm, uses Moses and his ascent on Mt Sinai to provide understanding of the notion of plunging into darkness. Moses, first submits to purification then contemplation and finally renunciation of the mind to become "supremely united to the complete unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."⁴⁹ Moses, as motif, for the Fathers was extremely important and fully explored by Gregory of Nyssa in "The Life of Moses" where the themes of transcendence and immanence of God are also explored. It is not an issue for Dionysius as to whether humanity is capable of union with God, and his purpose is to point the way for those who are purified and through contemplation, perfected to experience what cannot be put into words by participating through grace to God.

Dionysius then deals with the core theme of the quiddity of affirmative and negative theology. In that regard he refers to his works "Theological Representations" that relate to how Jesus Christ became God - Man and how God is monad and triune simultaneously. He also refers to "Symbolic Theology" to discuss analogies of God drawn from sense perception. These two claimed works, together with the Divine Names demonstrate emanation and multiplicity as the One descends into human consciousness. The journey now contemplated is a response by humanity, who is called to cleave to the good, to ascend and the higher the soul ascends spirally towards God, "the more language falters and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable."⁵⁰

The logic to the approach is plain. When making assertions about God then God will be compared to what is most similar to the Majesty and Might as suits God. This provides human understanding as God is manifested. On the other hand denials begin by denying those with qualities that are dissimilar to God. Thus if the vision of God is an old man with a white beard, sitting on a log of wood, it is easier to ideate with the old man with a white beard as God than the log of wood. Hence, although like images reveal something positive, unlike images negate and is easier to negate initially a log as an old man needs to be denied as the image acts as diversion from the absolute reality of the unknown God.

Thus Dionysius can say "The Cause of all is above all, and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless."⁵¹ God has no quality that can be identified with the decay of created beings. He is infinite and totally self-giving hence he gives himself infinitely and creation can only participate to the extent of its nature. Hence God is not known to us and is "beyond assertion and denial."⁵² Of course the human mind can make

assertions and denials and what it believes is God but can never make any assertion or denial of God as to his ultimate reality. Yet if God lives in the unapproachable light it is here "that is found everyone worthy to know upon God and to look upon him"⁵³ without knowing what it is that it is being regarded by the human mind.

An analysis of some ideas of the Areopagite

"God is not number"⁵⁴ gives rise to a core concern of Christians. This brings into dispute the notion of the triune and monad God. St Basil was able to deal with the antimony by stating "we do not count by addition passing from the one to the many by increase."⁵⁵ In other words it is not a quantity but a unity in the One that is the absolute God. Thus God is not number in reality and he is not three, as that limits him. Any limitation is false in that it states something positive about God. Thus the proposition that God is not number makes sense within the approach of the Areopagite.

Also, consider the gulf in the notion of "It falls neither within the predicate of non being nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they actually are."⁵⁶ This raises the idea that for Dionysius, Man and God are foreign to each other. Here apophatism in the hands of Dionysius appears to place differing and entirely separate ontology's on being with both God and Man being strangers to the others notion of being. The notion of God to Dionysius is not the God who creates "ex nihilo" for it that were so. How could the creator not recognize his creation but rather that upon emanation? At this point the Aeropagite shows his neo-platonic thought whereby the gulf between transcendence and corporeal reality is by the device of emanation and return. The exitus - reditus found in God does not rely upon God

knowing his creation but assumes his creation which creation is called to the One by the pull of beautiful and good that emanates from God.

Spearitt mentions as a criticism of the Mystical Theology that the idea of emanation and return is calculated to replace the Christian virtue of charity with an agnostic technique of deification culminating in annihilation in the bosom of the neo-platonic One.⁵⁷

Some questions in relation to God

Dionysius also states "the Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless."⁵⁸ This in normal understanding infers that the cause of all is existence, living, and possession of both mind and speech. In Chapter 5 as "we climb higher" toward the unknown the language changes to the positive and states that "it does not live nor is it life."⁵⁹ Here as we ascend negative language that provides affirmations gives way to the positive language of negation.

Although there appears to be a paradox in language (negative affirmations and positive negations), it is comprehensible if one considers the idea that God is Supra-Personal and absolute. Hence God cannot say "I am I and I am not you" as this implies differentiation and differentiation represents a finite state. If God is absolute and Supra-Personal, it follows that his essence cannot participate in anything finite, which created order is. Hence as life is finite, God cannot be life as that would be participation in the finite.

The notion of the finite also requires consideration. The idea of infinity implies unbounded space, time or quantity, hence the finite implies limitations. Yet there is no limit to the finite, as the edge of infinity is never reached. With Dionysius, one suspects

that his use of language is deliberately variable in emphasis, clarity and extent of meaning so as to further add to the mystery of God.

Perhaps when Dionysius expresses something by way of negation then nothing more should be implied in the mind of the reader for as Dionysius reminds "what is not a horse is not necessarily a human". Therefore, Dionysius should be limited to the information imparted by way of affirmation or negation. Hence the vision of God fades into darkness as it is beyond assertion and denial to comprehend God.

Summary

The God of Dionysius can be known in silence and experientially. God is stable, infinite, simple and totally self-giving. He is available to all his creatures to the extent they share in Gods being. Being is freely given as Gods providence. Humanity who shares that Being has had awakened within their soul the desire to cleave to God and hence ascend towards knowing God.

God demands nothing from his creatures and as infinite Being gives his Being infinitely. As creatures with freedom, to yearn for God, each person in accordance with their respective capacity is able to empty themselves and hence able to better experience existentially and experientially union with God, but at a level beyond the intellect and beyond description. To Dionysius language are sign posts guiding to an ecstatic relationship with God and to an intellectual encapsulation and capture of The Unknown God.

It is only by emptying oneself and going beyond language and standing in awe and silence that one finds union with the one that has always been there for all his creation.

ENDNOTES

Note: In this essay the following abbreviations are used:

E = Letters

C.H. = The Celestial Hierarchy

E.H. = The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

D.N. = The Devine Names

M.T. = The Mystical Theology

The reference work that is referred to is "Pseudo-Dionysius : *The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, New York, 1987. All text page references are to this work.

¹ Andrew Louth, *The origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. P1

² M.T. 1025B P138

³ DN 705D P79

⁴ Acts 17:34

⁵ Ep 7:3 P269

⁶ DN 681B P69

⁷ Ep 10 P289

⁸ DN 681B P69

⁹ Ep 7:2 P268

¹⁰ Ep 8 P269 – 280

¹¹ MT 1033B P139

¹² MT 1032D P138

¹³ DN 736B P69

¹⁴ CH 212B P166

¹⁵ EH 373B P197

¹⁶ DN 696B P72

¹⁷ DN 696C P73

¹⁸ DN 713A P83

¹⁹ DN 648C P65

²⁰ DN Ch 4:19 P84-86

²¹ Florovsky. *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*

²² Chadwick H. *The Penguin History of the Church : The Early Church*, Penguin Books, London 1993, P207

²³ Ep 1

²⁴ Ep 2

²⁵ Ep 4

²⁶ Ep 3

- ²⁷ Ep 5 P266
- ²⁸ Ep 6
- ²⁹ Ep 7 1077C
- ³⁰ Ep 8
- ³¹ Ep 9
- ³² Pseudo Dionysius, *The Complete Works* P133
- ³³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* P23
- ³⁴ MT 997
- ³⁵ MT 997 P135
- ³⁶ DN 588C P50
- ³⁷ DN 588C P50
- ³⁸ MT 1000C P136
- ³⁹ DN 981A P129
- ⁴⁰ MT 997A P135
- ⁴¹ MT 997B P135
- ⁴² Dionysius The Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology* trans C.E. Rolt P7
- ⁴³ DN 8200 P99
- ⁴⁴ MT 997 P13
- ⁴⁵ DN 705B P78
- ⁴⁶ MT 997B P135
- ⁴⁷ MT 1000A P135
- ⁴⁸ DN 981B P130
- ⁴⁹ MT 1001A P137
- ⁵⁰ MT 1033C P139
- ⁵¹ MT 1040D P140
- ⁵² MT 1048B
- ⁵³ EP5 1073A P265
- ⁵⁴ MT 1045D P141
- ⁵⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* P47
- ⁵⁶ MT 1048A P141
- ⁵⁷ Spearitt A, *Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism* P9
- ⁵⁸ MT 1040D
- ⁵⁹ MT 1048A P141

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