

Pseudo-Dionysius and the Negation of Models of God

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Modeling God depends on the condition of God's being knowable and the corresponding ability of human beings to know God. But a singular movement of Christian theology holds precisely that God is *unknowable* and that people do *not* have the capacity to describe God. The doctrine of divine transcendence, and the resulting mystery of God, is a heritage of Neoplatonist philosophy and is called apophatic (from the Greek *apophanai*, to negate or say no) theology. In Latin it is referred to as the *via negativa* (negative way). Deeply suspicious of the limitations of human thought and language, it argues that the only absolutely true statements about God are negative ones. By taking seriously the notion of divine infinity, apophatic theology points out that all human thought is ultimately based on the limited world of human experience. If God is infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., God is so far beyond human experience that all that one can correctly say is what God is *not*.

Pseudo-Dionysius' model of God is successful because of a tension he carefully maintains between God's nameability and God's unnameability. He avoids on the one hand, the anthropomorphism of identifying God using human concepts, and, on the other hand, the atheism resulting from not identifying God at all. Names for God are always anthropomorphic, or at least rooted in human experience of the world of space and time. If we describe God as "good," the term "good" can be used in a univocal, analogical, or equivocal sense. The univocal and analogical senses of the term tend to portray God as just another being, albeit an infinitely powerful one. The errors of cataphatic or positive theology that come from imperfect analogies between the divine and the human are matched by the atheistic irrelevance into which the divine is forced by a purely negative theology.

Negative theology, saying God is "not good," is a kind of univocal use of the term "good." God is not good in the same sense of the word meant when it refers to the created order. But this, then is either the same as saying "God is not good," i.e.

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saying God is bad, or it is ultimately a form of analogy with the problems described above. If the term “good” simply means something different when applied to God, there are problems with the meaningfulness of language at all when applied to God. The difficulty is that a total inability to speak of God results in an absence of any divine-human interaction. Utter silence is effectively atheism. Pseudo-Dionysius avoids these two extremes by a Neoplatonic strategy of beginning with divine mystery, moving to the rich nameability that comes from divine fecundity as the Good, and then returning to the mystery of God that is supereminent or beyond all names.

Christian apophaticism is a Neoplatonic tradition found in even early Church fathers who recognized the potential that this philosophy had for expressing essential Christian doctrines. It was the Greek thinkers, Proclus and Plotinus (see Kenney’s piece on Plotinus in this section), who were responsible for a reformulation of Plato’s thought that breathed new life into the idea of a single, infinite, and mysterious source of all things. Christian Neoplatonists found fertile ground in this originally pagan concept and transformed it to conform with Christian orthodoxy. At the heart of Christian Neoplatonism lies the work of the pseudonymous Dionysius (Denys) the Areopagite. Usually referred to as “Pseudo-Dionysius” or the “Pseudo-Areopagite,” this mysterious figure was purportedly the Dionysius converted by the sermons of the apostle Paul referenced in the book of Acts.

While other early Christians, including Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Evagrius, were influenced by Neoplatonism as well, Pseudo-Dionysius stands alone in his exhaustive and even lyrical exposition of the mystery of God. In turn, his books influenced a host of later thinkers, including Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa (for more, see Mieth’s piece on Eckhart in this section, and my piece on Nicholas of Cusa in the section on panentheism). Nicholas of Cusa, for example, refers to him as “the great Dionysius” and “the greatest Dionysius,” often mentioning him in company with “the divine Plato.” He wrote appreciatively of the foolish wisdom of Pseudo-Dionysius and his own term “learned ignorance” may well originate here. Although not all of the texts Pseudo-Dionysius is thought to have wrote have survived (some may never have actually been written), those that are extant include *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.¹

Despite his importance in the history of Christian theology, his identity remains opaque. While certainly not the contemporary of the New Testament figures he claimed to be, his dates and location have been only roughly ascertained. At best, he can be traced to the fifth or sixth century and is suspected to have been a Syrian monk. Regardless of who he was, his singular work has been foundational to apophatic or negative theology. A look at his major texts *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* will uncover his unique vision of a God at once knowable, unknowable, and supereminent. The Neoplatonic foundation of his Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought is evident as he begins by affirming divine transcendence and our inability to name him before moving on to such cataphatic (positive) names for God that are available to us.

¹ Luibheid (1987), hereafter referred to as *DN* and *MT*.

To escape the limitations of cataphatic theology, he turns to apophatic or negative theology, which denies all names of God. Finding this inadequate as well, he moves to supereminent theology and a return to the mystery of God.

His work approaches the knowledge of God through the exercise of naming him. While the godhead is a unified and hidden whole, theologians praise it by many names, indeed, says Pseudo-Dionysius, by every name. In the first chapter of *The Divine Names* Pseudo-Dionysius is intent upon establishing the transcendence of God. Because God is a divine ray of light beyond being, he is beyond our capacity to know or name him. True enlightenment entails a halt to the activities of the mind. Nevertheless, the transcendent comes to us veiled in names passed down through tradition and scripture. The names he will apply to God in the following chapters, including “Light,” “Being,” and “Life,” are dependent on this foundational mystery.

This is a theme that Pseudo-Dionysius will return to in *The Mystical Theology*. Divine nameability is both preceded and followed by divine mystery and unnameability. Because we understand God as best we can, as he comes to us, we use analogies and symbols. Indeed, “to praise this divinely beneficent Providence, you must turn to all of creation.”² Thus, the theologians praise God by every name and as the nameless one. It is this multiplicity of names that Pseudo-Dionysius is concerned with, once he has established God’s original transcendence. He emphasizes the vast multiplicity of characteristics that describe God, both within and apart from scripture. These descriptions include every kind, from “human, fiery, and of amber shape” to having praiseworthy “eyes, ears, hair, face, hands, back, wings, arms, posterior, and feet.”³ Although Pseudo-Dionysius will focus on more conceptual names for God, the variety of characteristics is indicative of God’s goodness, where “good” refers to the divine fecundity as the source of all things.

Pseudo-Dionysius is careful to explain that the multiple names for God do not apply to multiple parts of God. God is one, whole, and indivisible. Even the doctrine of the Trinity does not impinge upon the basic unity of God. The differentiation of the godhead into Father, Son, and Spirit reflects the activity of God through procession into the persons of the Trinity. The incarnation is an act of God in which God reveals himself as differentiated. But human knowledge cannot penetrate beyond revelation to the godhead, in whom multiplicity is unity rather than plurality. Pseudo-Dionysius emphasizes the unity of the godhead through his repeated use of the prefix “super” or “supra,” from the Greek *hyper*, to refer to God beyond differentiation.

Thus, he argues, knowledge of God begins with prayer rather than reasoning. We do not pull the heights of divine knowledge down to us through rationality. Instead, the mind is prepared for union with God through prayer, and this is where true knowledge of God begins. Pseudo-Dionysius declares that although he does not possess the inspiration of his teacher, Hierotheus, nevertheless he is resolved to obey the law and share the truth that he does have. His own life reflects at an individual level what holds on a broader human scale. While our language is inadequate and our knowledge is limited, we are driven to speak and to try to know. God’s “most important

² DN I 593C. Luibheid (1987, p. 54).

³ DN I 597A. Luibheid (1987, p. 57).

name, ‘Good’⁴ derives from the divine presence in all things, and it is this that drives our imperfect individual and collective attempts to name God. Pseudo-Dionysius adopts the familiar Platonic analogy of the sun to represent the Good. Divine Goodness informs, sustains, and perfects all things in the same way that the sun’s rays enliven all beings. Thus, he writes, “The goodness of the transcendent God... gives light to everything capable of receiving it, it creates them, keeps them alive, preserves and perfects them... It is the Cause of the universe and its end.”⁵

The transition to the name “Light” is, thus, easily made. The light of God not only drives away the darkness of ignorance, but also returns all things to God. The Good is named “light of the mind” and “overflowing radiance,”⁶ as well as “the One” and “the Beautiful.” “Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty. And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being.”⁷ Names that originally indicate divine self-manifestation lead to names that concern the return of the created order to God. The Neoplatonic motion of procession outward from the One and return back to the One are ideas that clearly are foundational for the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius. In succeeding chapter, he uses much the same approach to a variety of names for God, including “Being,” “Life,” “Wisdom,” “Omnipotent,” “Holy of Holies,” “God of Gods” and a host of others. The book ends with a return to the notion of divine unity and the Neoplatonic vision of God as One.

In this context, he discusses his notion of evil as privation. He writes, “To put the matter briefly, all being derives from, exists, in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good. Whatever there is, whatever comes to be, is there and has being on account of the Beautiful and the Good.”⁸ Evil is a lack of being, a deficiency without any ontological substance at all. Whatever force evil possesses, whatever apparent existence it has, it derives from being an absence of the Good. God, therefore, is not a powerful being set against other, lesser powers, but is power and being itself with no rivals. This is a theme, of course, that will be repeated by later Christian theologians, including Augustine. Its importance here lies in the distinction Pseudo-Dionysius maintains between privation and negation. Whereas privation is the absence of something and is linked to evil, negation is the denial of the applicability of a characteristic to God because God surpasses both the characteristic and its privation.

His brief text *The Mystical Theology* carefully outlines this notion of divine supereminence. God is beyond both affirmative and negative statements. Negative theology does not state the opposite of affirmative theology, nor is paradox the last word about God. Rather, as the cause of all things, God is beyond affirmation and denial, presence and privation. Darkness here is not the darkness of an absence of light but a darkness beyond both darkness and light. Divine mystery resides beyond knowing

⁴ DN III 680B. Luibheid (1987, p. 68).

⁵ DN IV 697C. Luibheid (1987, p. 73).

⁶ DN IV 701A. Luibheid (1987, p. 76).

⁷ DNA IV. 704A. Luibheid (1987, p. 77).

⁸ DN IV 705D. Luibheid (1987, p. 79).

and unknowing. There are no oppositions in this supreme unity. Pseudo-Dionysius writes that “The mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute, and unchangeable, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow, they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen, they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond beauty.”⁹

The Mystical Theology is almost lyrical as it describes the mind’s ascent to the God that cannot be approached. Moses’ ascent up Mount Sinai is a metaphor for the climb the mind makes to mystical knowledge of God. Beyond the sensible and intelligible contemplation of the divine, indeed, beyond the mountain itself, Moses entered into the darkness of unknowing. But for neither Moses nor the individual seeking God, this unknowing is not the ignorance of his original absence of knowledge of God. It is union with the divine, a step beyond all oppositions. This is the inexpressible truth of the godhead, the mystery beyond language and conceptuality. And so the mind returns to its origin, the transcendent God, leaving behind all that is perceptible and shedding all that is conceivable.

Given the prominent influence of Neoplatonism on Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought, more must be said about its uniquely Christian soteriological role. It may be that it acts just as the Plotinian hierarchy of rational principles expressing the natural order of things, though costumed in Christian garb. However, a close look at the balance he strikes between divine manifestation and hiddenness and the absence of an emanational hierarchy illustrates his uniquely Christian vision. The Pseudo-Areopagite balances the manifesting God and the God beyond all manifestation in order to avoid making the created world a necessary emanation of God.

The careful tension between the mysterious divine essence and God’s energies results in a Christian metaphysics and epistemology. Both the mystical presence and absence of God’s self in creation and the apophatic and supereminent theology that reflects upon it are uniquely Christian, while at the same time deeply indebted to Greek Neoplatonism. His best known text, *The Divine Names*, and his smaller work, *The Mystical Theology*, outline God’s supereminence and reflect his awareness of the dangers of Neoplatonism. Though much in *The Mystical Theology* surpasses and occasionally contradicts his earlier statements, Pseudo-Dionysius never conclusively resolves the contradiction in favor of either immanence or transcendence. The Creator as Creator is unknown for Pseudo-Dionysius because of the paradox of manifestation and hiddenness inherent in the creative movement.

This is the significant difference between Pseudo-Dionysius and Greek philosophy. While the dialectic between an ineffable One and the many in which it self-expresses itself out is originally Neoplatonic, the religious rather than philosophical intent of Pseudo-Dionysius’ construction is evident. The One does not rationally explain the many, but is mysterious in its very relationship with it. Nor do the levels of hierarchy function as Neoplatonic static forms, each causing the next lower level. In place of the Neoplatonic hierarchy, in which a higher principle of reality underlies every lower principle, is a simultaneous and paradoxical manifesting and not-manifesting God.

For instance, in Greek Neoplatonism the principles of being, life, and intellect are located hierarchically between the One and the many and emanate from the One.

⁹ MT I 997 A, B. Luibheid (1987, p. 135).

But for Pseudo-Dionysius, they are not divine, do not exist between God and creation, nor do they exist in their own right. Creation is not a necessary descent from God down through a series of lesser principles that the mind can then ascend up to God. Rather, the principles are divine Providence itself, God in his self-manifestation. The hierarchical levels of existence are not independently real to any degree.

The Areopagite is aware that the persons of the Trinity could be mistaken for Christian versions of emanations of the One. In light of this, he stresses that the terms “good,” “life,” “Lord,” etc. apply to all persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Incarnation is not a logical completion of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being, but a mysterious and crucial act of God.

The tension between the divinity as total source of all creation and the voluntary nature of the creative act originates in God. The divine forms are at once within God, though apart from him in the created order. They never truly stand alone. Instead, there is a balance between their existence within God insofar as they are creative principles and their existence in creation insofar as God is their cause. They have no prior existence to creation and differentiated from God and, thus, are not Neoplatonic emanations. Like Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius frequently uses the term “icon” to describe the way that each level of the hierarchy makes present its precedent. However, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the levels are incarnational. In Neoplatonism, the One is reached through the mind’s ascent to increasingly disincarnate states. Pseudo-Dionysius clearly differs from pagan thought in his affirmation of the incarnate, material world.

All of existence originates in the mystery of the divine; it is not rationally mediated through a series of emanations. By placing the forms or principles within the One, the Pseudo-Areopagite has done away with the Neoplatonic hierarchies and put the impetus toward multiplicity within God himself. Furthermore, he carefully says that this does not mean that there is multiplicity in the Godhead and explains that in God, wisdom, life, and being are merely names for the acts of God regarding creation. They do not characterize God apart from his creativity, nor are they separate causes within God.

Pseudo-Dionysius’ soteriology is characteristically Neoplatonic insofar as it describes a return to God. His view of creation and deification mirrors the procession and return of Neoplatonism. However, he specifically repudiates an approach to God through the power of human reason. Here deification is the immediate unity with God that follows from self-transcendence. Moreover, the latter is a result of divine gifts, not of an ascent through a series of causes. Indeed, God is specifically referred to as the cause of all intelligence, reason, wisdom, and understanding.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, before we are perfectly united with God and our minds are carried away, we do try on our own to reach God rationally, through symbolism and analogy. But, ultimately,

We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, preexisted all the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of it nor can it at all be contemplated.¹⁰

¹⁰DN I 592D. Luibheid (1987, p. 53).

Natural human rationality, itself a divine gift, is used to approach God as far as it is able. His understanding of grace is expressed here when, significantly using the passive voice, he writes, “We, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God.”¹¹ In the end, however, the mind is stilled when it is struck by the burning light of God. The return to God is a result of the engulfing fire of divine love, not of philosophical discipline. God’s love actively unites the creature to him in a consuming blaze. This alone leads to growth into divine likeness.

Here the Areopagite’s distinction from the Neoplatonic hierarchy of emanation comes to its full significance. Given the ultimate impotence of the mind to truly know God on its own, one might argue that any pursuit of knowledge is futile. After all, no exercise of the mind, however sophisticated, can bring union with God. Unknowing agnosticism, even atheism, would be a demand of faith. If God is totally unknowable, even God’s existence would be necessarily suspect. On the other hand, if, as Pseudo-Dionysius seems to indicate, the attempt to know God is still a worthwhile pursuit, one might ask what knowledge the mind actually attains. If, before the mind is engulfed in the divine light where God cannot be named, naming has any validity at all, what is exactly is it that is named?

The Neoplatonic answer would be that it is the divine emanations, the levels in the metaphysical hierarchy that are named. While the mysterious One is not known, the lesser emanations can be known. Pseudo-Dionysius, however, has an entirely different answer. Instead of distinguishing among a series of ever-increasing levels of divinity, he makes the distinction between God-in-himself and God in his processions, two “levels” that are not levels at all because they are simultaneous. About the name “Being,” for instance, Pseudo-Dionysius writes,

But I must point out that the purpose of what I have to say is not to reveal that being in its transcendence, for this is something beyond words, something unknown and wholly unrevealed, something above unity itself. What I wish to do is to sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine Source of being into the total domain of being.¹²

In God’s processions, God is namable and known, though in himself God is unnamable and unknowable. Insofar as God has externalized himself in creation, God is approachable by the human intellect. Without this approachability, such a gulf would exist between Creator and creature that atheism would be the only reasonable human response. Instead, the divine self-manifestation provides accurate, though limited, knowledge of God and the promise of ultimate return to God.

With this the difficulties of the paradox between the natural drive to know God and his ultimate unknowability are resolved. It is not that the names of God are deceptions, giving false information about him. Nor are they only partially true, losing their accuracy as one moves up the series of emanations. And, finally, they are not exercises in futility, just as easily pursued as not. Instead, they are completely accurate and worthy of pursuit insofar as they apply to God as God has proceeded out from God’s self. In Godself, in God’s super-essence, God is, however, still hidden.

¹¹ DN I 589D Luibheid (1987, p. 51).

¹² DN V 816B. Luibheid (1987, p. 96).

The Pseudo-Areopagite's careful outline of the hierarchical principles is, thus, indicative of his views regarding the mysterious balance between the knowable, manifested God and the hidden, inscrutable God. His own understanding of mystical union with God is clearly distinct from a Neoplatonic intellectual ascent. The created order is validated, rather than negated, and the return to the divine is achieved through grace instead of intellectual ascent. Divine theophany in an iconic order replaces an ascent of rational principles with an encounter with the incarnate God. In light of both his creative use of Neoplatonic philosophy and his essential orthodoxy, it is no wonder that Pseudo-Dionysius has enjoyed such influence. His unique model of God stands at the beginning of a significant branch of Christian theology, the *via negativa*.

Suggested Readings

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