
THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

BY DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133–141.

CHAPTER ONE

What is the divine darkness?

[997A] 1. Trinity!! Higher than any being,
any divinity, any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
[997B] 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 all beauty.

For this I pray; and, Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things,² is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and

² The terms "mystic" (see line 7 of poem above) and "mysterious" both translate *mustikos*, with some reservations. The former translation is not meant in the later sense of a "mystical" or extraordinary, private experience of transcending one's self, but rather in the more general sense of something "mysterious" or secret or hidden. See Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, p. 47, and Louis Bouyer, "Mystique, essai sur l'histoire du mot," *Supplement de la Vie spirituelle* 9 (May 15, 1949). Bouyer's excellent discussion of the term "mystical" in Pseudo-Dionysius is more accessible in *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 406–16.

knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, [1000A] shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.³

2. But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed,⁴ that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place.⁵ And if initiation into the divine is beyond such people, what is to be said of those others, still more uninformed, who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being, [1000B] and who claim that it is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made? 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. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.⁶

3. This, at least, is what was taught by the blessed Bartholomew.⁷ He says that the Word of God is vast and minuscule, that the Gospel is wide-ranging and yet restricted. [1000C] To me it seems that in this he is extraordinarily shrewd, for he has grasped that the good cause of all is both eloquent and taciturn, indeed wordless. It has neither word nor act of understanding, since it is on a plane above all this, and it is made manifest only to those who travel through foul and fair, who pass beyond the summit of every holy ascent, who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things.⁸ It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, [1000D] he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the

3 This advice to Timothy introduces both the specific account of Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai (Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, pp. 48f.) and also the general uplifting that goes beyond the perceptible (Chapter 4 and the hierarchical treatises) and even beyond the intelligible (Chapter 5).

4 See Socrates' similar warning in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 155e. On literary secrecy in general, see EH 1, note 4.

5 Ps 18:11.

6 This passage directly contradicts a passage from Aristotle, who used identical terminology to argue that negations are the opposites of affirmations (*On Interpretation* 17a 31–33). Here at the outset and again at its conclusion (MT 5 1048B 16–21), the treatise refutes the impression that negations can capture the transcendent Cause of all.

7 Like the other apostles, the Bartholomew of the New Testament (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13) was later credited with several apocryphal works.

8 Ex 20:21; cf. Ex 19.

summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. [1001A] Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.⁹ Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.¹⁰

CHAPTER TWO

[1025A] *How one should be united, and attribute praises, to the Cause of all things who is beyond all things.*

I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. [1025B] They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside¹¹ they show up the beauty which is hidden.

Now it seems to me that we should praise the denials quite differently than we do the assertions. When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through

⁹ This expression is perhaps better known as “the cloud of unknowing” because of the treatise by an anonymous English author of the fourteenth century: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

¹⁰ The biblical narrative of Moses’ ascent (Ex 19 and 20:18–21) was also the subject of Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses*, especially Part II, #152–170 (PG 44 372C–380A), where many of the Areopagite’s themes are anticipated. As in the accounts of Hierotheus (DN 2 648AB 10–20 and DN 3 681C 41 to 684A 3) and of Carpos (Ep. 8 1097BC 21–26), this passage uses terminology otherwise associated with religious ritual. Here the Sinai events correspond to the liturgical experience of the hierarch, for whom Moses is indeed the prototype (EH 5 501C 33f.). While Gregory made this correspondence more explicit (#160), Dionysius lets his specialized terminology suggest it.

Like Moses, the hierarch is first purified, both with the other worshipers (EH 2 397B 14–21 and EH 3 428B 16) and also in his own ceremonial “purification” (EH 3 440A 11–14). In the liturgical dismissal the hierarch and those who have not yet completed their purification are separated (EH 3 436A 3–5) just as Moses stands apart from the crowds. Like Moses, the hierarch knows how to transcend the bare sounds of the scriptures (DN 4 708C 28) and the material lights of the rite (CH 1 121D 42f.). The hierarch and his “chosen” assistants approach the altar and, like Moses, contemplate the divine things (EH 3 425D 44–46). “Contemplation” is indeed the very name of the liturgical interpretation in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

¹¹ “Clearing aside” here translates a term (aphairesis) that is otherwise rendered “denial.”

intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things¹² so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.

CHAPTER THREE

What are the affirmative theologies and what are the negative?

[1032D] In my *Theological Representations*,¹³ I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology. [1033A] I have shown the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be one and then triune, how Fatherhood and Sonship are predicated of it, the meaning of the theology of the Spirit, how these core lights of goodness grew from the incorporeal and indivisible good, and how in this sprouting they have remained inseparable from their co-eternal foundation in it, in themselves, and in each other.¹⁴ I have spoken of how Jesus, who is above individual being, became a being with a true human nature. Other revelations of scripture were also praised in *The Theological Representations*.

In *The Divine Names* I have shown the sense in which God is described as good, existent, life, wisdom, power, and whatever other things pertain to the conceptual names for God.¹⁵ In my *Symbolic Theology*¹⁶ I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, [1033B] of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God. And I feel sure that you have noticed how these latter come much more abundantly than what went before, since *The Theological Representations* and a discussion of the names appropriate to God are inevitably briefer than what can be said in *The Symbolic Theology*. The fact is that the more we take 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 speeches less and unknowing. [1033C] In the earlier books my argument traveled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this

12 These cryptic references to descending assertions and ascending denials are expanded in the next chapter.

13 This lost or fictitious treatise is mentioned and perhaps summarized in the first chapter of *The Divine Names* (DN 1 585B 10f. and 589D 38 to 592B 17). See DN 1, notes 3 and 10, for additional references.

14 The symbolism of lights and sprouting plants is also used for the Son and the Spirit in DN 2 645B 19–24.

15 These five biblical names for God are the first to be discussed in *The Divine Names* (chapters four through eight).

16 On this lost or fictitious treatise, see DN 1, note 89.

downward path an ever-increasing number of ideas which multiplied with every stage of the descent. But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, 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.

Now you may wonder why it is that, after starting out from the highest category when our method involved assertions, we begin now from the lowest category when it involves a denial. The reason is this. When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought?¹⁷ [1033D]

CHAPTER FOUR

That the supreme Cause of every perceptible thing is not itself perceptible.

17 Or, “is it not more incorrect to say that God gets drunk or raves than that he is expressed or conceived?”

“Life,” “goodness,” “air,” etc., are all biblical examples and are discussed elsewhere in the corpus (DN 1 596ABC, CH 2 144CD, Ep. 9 1105B; “air” refers to the “still small breeze” of 1 Kings 19:12 in the Septuagint). The point here is that not all affirmations concerning God are equally inappropriate; they are arranged in a descending order of decreasing congruity. Affirmative theology begins with the loftier, more congruous comparisons and then proceeds “down” to the less appropriate ones. Thus, as the author reminds us, The Theological Representations began with God’s oneness and proceeded down into the multiplicity of affirming the Trinity and the incarnation. The Divine Names then affirmed the more numerous designations for God which come from mental concepts, while The Symbolic Theology “descended” into the still more pluralized realm of sense perception and its plethora of symbols for the deity. This pattern of descending affirmations and ascending negations can be interpreted in terms of late Neoplatonism’s “procession” from the One down into plurality and the “return” of all back to the One (CH 1, note 4).

In the “return,” not all negations concerning God are equally appropriate; the attributes to be negated are arranged in an ascending order of decreasing incongruity, first considering and negating the lowest or most obviously false statements about God and then moving up to deny those that may seem more congruous. Thus the first to be denied are the perceptible attributes, starting with The Mystical Theology, Chapter 4, which therefore previews the two subsequent treatises on perceptible symbols, The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. Chapter 2 of the former work will continue the theme of negating and transcending symbols, namely, interpreting first the most incongruous of the perceptible symbols attributed to the celestial, whether to the angels or to God. The anagogical or uplifting method of interpretation in these two treatises incorporates into itself the principles of negative theology. Both the spatial, material depictions of the angels in the scriptures and also the temporal, sequential images of God in the liturgy must be transcended in the ascent from the perceptible to the intelligible. Thus, “as we climb higher,” Chapter 5 of The Mystical Theology denies and moves beyond all our concepts or “conceptual” attributes of God and concludes by abandoning all speech and thought, even negations.

On this sequence of treatises, see P. Rorem, “The Place of The Mystical Theology in the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus,” *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 87–98.

[1040D] So this is what we say. The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible. It suffers neither disorder nor disturbance and is overwhelmed by no earthly passion. It is not powerless and subject to the disturbances caused by sense perception. It endures no deprivation of light. It passes through no change, decay, division, loss, no ebb and flow, nothing of which the senses may be aware. None of all this can either be identified with it nor attributed to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

[1045D] *That the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual.*

Again, as we climb higher we say this. It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, [1048A] equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, [1048B] error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.¹

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133–141.