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AGNŌSIA: The Apophatic Experience of God in Dionysius the Areopagite

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Abstract

The mystical union with God is accomplished at the moment when the Intellect separates from itself, by entering into the Divine Darkness. This ecstasy of the Intellect and this accession to God are the ones who allow it to know God not by itself but by the union itself, to know God in God and through God. This is “the most divine knowledge” qua unknowing (cf. *De divinis nominibus* VII.3). There is a difference between ignorance (agnoia) and unknowing (agnōsia) which corresponds to the distinction between skotos (obscurity qua deprivation of light) and gnophos (darkness qua superabundance of light).

Keywords

Dionysius the Areopagite, experience of God, apophatic theology, agnōsia, henōsis.

For Dionysius the Areopagite, the full expression of negative theology is reached only when the mind relinquishes all its intellectual preoccupations and enters into *agnōsia*, the experience of “knowing through unknowing”¹

¹ Regarding the theme of “unknowing” in Dionysius, see, e.g.: J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu: essai sur la structure rationnelle de la doctrine mystique du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1959, pp. 155-161; P. Spearritt, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Fribourg, 1968, pp. 153-161; Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis. L'union Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*, Brill,

all, known to no one in reference to nothing” – Καὶ ἐν πᾶσι πάντα ἐστὶ καὶ ἐν οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν καὶ ἐκ πάντων πᾶσι γινώσκειται καὶ ἐξ οὐδενὸς οὐδενί⁶.

P. Spearritt⁷ extracts from here the ontological justification for the doctrine of *unknowing*: God is knowable in all things because all things “are God by participation”; but as “no things are God by nature”, therefore God is fundamentally *unknowable* to all things. The second pair of paradoxes seems even more important than the first one. God’s transcendence is the premise for His immanence, and not vice versa; thus, God’s unknowability is the necessary pre-condition for Him to be *analogically* known.

An eloquent example of apparent contradiction has as central note “the most divine knowledge of God”, about which it is said that “is one which knows through unknowing in the unity beyond intellect” – ἡ θειοτάτη θεοῦ γνῶσις ἢ δι’ ἀγνωσίας γινωσκομένη κατὰ τὴν ὑπέρνοῦν ἔνωσιν⁸.

To this presentation, we can add a poetic description of the *way of unknowing* from the *Mystical Theology*: “There the simple, absolved, and unchanged mysteries of theology lie hidden in the darkness *hyper-light* of the hidden mystical silence” – ἐν θατὰ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀπόλυτα καὶ ἄτρεπτα τῆς θεολογίας μυστήρια κατὰ τὸν ὑπέρφωτον ἐγκεκάλυπται τῆς κρυφιομύστουσιγῆς γνόφον⁹.

The disciple Timothy is urged to leave behind senses and intellect, and all things, including himself, to be “raised up to the rays of the divine darkness *hyper-being*” – ἐκστάσει πρὸς τὸν ὑπερ οὐσιοντοῦθειοῦ σκότους ἀκτῖνα¹⁰. The cloud imagery is based here on the text from the Psalm 17, 12: “And He made darkness his secret place, His tabernacle round about Him, dark water in the clouds of the air” – καὶ ἔθετοσκότος ἀποκρυφὴν αὐτοῦ· κύκλω αὐτοῦ ἢ σκηνὴ αὐτοῦ, σκοτεινὸν ὕδωρ ἐν νεφέλαις ἀέρων. But the main source must have been the scriptural image already current

⁶ *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872A (198.8-9 Suchla) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 179).

⁷ Cf. *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, p. 153-154.

⁸ *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872A-B (198.12-13 Suchla) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 179). Cf. P. Spearritt, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, p. 154-155.

⁹ *De mystica theologia* I.1, 998A (141.4-142.2 Heil/ Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 211, modified).

¹⁰ *De mystica theologia* I.1, 1000A (142.10 Heil/Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 212). Cf. P. Spearritt, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, p. 155.

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in Philo of Alexandria and St Gregory of Nyssa, in about the same context: the journey of Moses up the dark mountain of the *deus absconditus*.

St Gregory of Nyssa¹¹ was the one who illustrated the ascent of the soul towards God as a continuous practice of ἀφαίρεσις: he described the three stages of the “journey” of the soul as a movement from *light* (Exodus 19, 3) – which represents the knowledge of created effects –, through *cloud* (Exodus 19, 16-19) – which involves the removal of unknown content, so that God can be known in the “the mirror of the soul” – and, finally, to the *darkness* of union with God (Exodus 20, 21) – by which the transcendent is known through *unknowing*¹²:

“This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness – Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ ἡ ἀληθὴς ἐστὶν εἰδησις τοῦ ζητουμένου καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν, ὅτι ὑπέρκειται πάσης εἰδήσεως τὸ ζητούμενον, οἷόν τι γνόφωτῇ ἀκαταληγία πανταχόθεν διειλημμένον”¹³.

Another suggestive scene for the epistemological ascent to apophatic union is the one of the bride in *Homilies on the Song of Songs* who – being immersed in “the divine night”¹⁴ – abandons sense perception and rises towards higher horizons of knowledge, learning by the *silence* of the angelic rank that the Beloved cannot be comprehended¹⁵. The culmination of the ascent coincides with achieving awareness that “her beloved is known only in *unknowing*”:

¹¹ Regarding the place of St Gregory of Nyssa in apophatic tradition, see, e.g., Ivana Noble, *The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa*, in “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis”, eds. Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2002, p. 323-339; Ari Ojell, *Apophatic Theology*, in “The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa”, eds. L.F. Mateo-Seco and G. Maspero, Brill, Leiden/ Boston, 2010, p. 68-73.

¹² Cf. Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God...*, p. 253.

¹³ *De vita Mosis* 2.163 (ed. J. Daniélou, Grégoire de Nysse, *La vie de Moïse*, 3rdedn., “Sources chrétiennes” 1, Cerf, Paris, 1968) (trans. A.J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson, in Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978, p. 95).

¹⁴ On the theme of “divine darkness” in St. Gregory of Nyssa, see M. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration*, in “The Journal of Religion”, vol. 79, no. 4, 1999, p. 592-616.

¹⁵ See *In Canticum canticorum* III, 1-4 (ed. H. Langerbeck, *Gregorii Nysseni opera*, vol. 6, Brill, Leiden, 1960).

So she says, “*No sooner had I passed them by*, having departed from the whole created order and passed by everything in the creation that is intelligible and left behind every conceptual approach, than I found the Beloved by faith...” – διὰ τοῦ τό φησι Μικρὸν ὅτε παρῆλθον ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ἀφεῖσα πᾶσαν τὴν κτίσιν καὶ παρελθοῦσα πᾶν τὸ ἐν τῇ κτίσει νοούμενον καὶ πᾶσαν καταληπτικὴν ἔφοδον καταλιποῦσα, τῇ πίστει εὗρον τὸν ἀγαπώμενον¹⁶.

Reaching “that unknowing higher than knowing”, where it is united with the Beloved, the bride goes back to maiden companions and begins talking to them:

“Then once again, out of goodwill, she addresses the daughters of Jerusalem – those whom, in the preceding passage, the Word called thorns by comparison with the beauty of the Bride, which was likened to that of a lily, and by an oath that invokes the powers within the cosmos she arouses them to an equal measure of love, so that the will of the Bridegroom may become operative in their case too – Ἐπὶ τούτοις πάλιν ὑπὸ φιλανθρωπίας καὶ ταῖς θυγατράσιν Ἱερουσαλήμ διαλέγεται, ἅς ἐν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν συγκρίσει τοῦ τῆς νύμφης κάλλους τοῦ παρεικασθέντος τῷ κρίνῳ ἀκάνθας ὁ λόγος ὠνόμασε, καὶ διὰ τοῦ ὄρκου τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ δυνάμεων πρὸς τὸ ἴσοντῆς ἀγάπης διανίστησι μέτρον, ὥστε τὸ θέλημα τοῦ νυμφίου καὶ ἐπ’ αὐτῶν ἐν ἐργὸν γενέσθαι”¹⁷.

The apophatic silence from the bride’s heart closet now overflows *language*. The bride’s speech generates in the daughters of Jerusalem the same type of response that Logos generated upon her: *viz.* the ascending desire¹⁸.

There is in St Gregory of Nyssa an important dimension of ἀπόφασις which was, in general, overlooked and that Martin Laird¹⁹ names λογόφασις:

¹⁶ *In Canticum canticorum* VI, 183.5-9 Langerbeck (trans. R.A. Norris jr., in Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2012, p. 195).

¹⁷ *In Canticum canticorum* VI, 184.10-15 Langerbeck (trans. R.A. Norris jr., in Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, p. 197).

¹⁸ See M. Laird, *Apophasis and Logophasis in Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum*, in “*Studia Patristica*”, vol. 37, 2001, Peeters, Louvain, p. 127-129.

¹⁹ *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith. Union, Knowledge, and divine presence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/ New York, 2004, p. 154-174.

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based on the apophatic union of the bride with the Logos, her discourse receives the power and effectiveness of the Logos Himself. This union of the bride and the Bridegroom has a dual dimension: a perspective involves ascending “in *unknowing* to union in darkness beyond comprehension”. But from another angle, due to the bride’s union with the Logos, she *mediates* the features of the Logos: *viz.* the power to attract and transform²⁰.

It is, however, imperative to draw a clear distinction between λογόφασις and καταφασις: while kataphatic speech is based on the knowledge of God from His energies – knowledge inferred from its created effects²¹, *logophatic* language instead is based and developed from the apophatic union beyond thought and speech. While cataphatic language is one that “searches for God”, the apophatic union language is one “full of God”²².

In his exegesis to the text of Exodus, Dionysius explains the fact that, in order to be raised through unknowing into union with God²³, Moses “does not see God – for God is unseen – but *the place* where God is” – θεωρεῖ δὲ οὐκ αὐτόν (ἀθέατος γάρ), ἀλλὰ τὸν τόπον, οὗ ἔστη²⁴. Moses first purifies himself and, isolating himself from the unpurified ones, moves upwards towards the highest ascent, and finally enters alone into the mystical darkness of *unknowing* in order to be completely united there with the transcendent Unknown²⁵:

²⁰ M. Laird, *Apophasis and Logophasis...*, p. 129.

²¹ Cf. D. Carabine, *Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God*, in “The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity”, eds. Th. Finan and V. Twomey, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1992, p. 97.

²² Cf. M. Laird, *Apophasis and Logophasis...*, p. 132.

²³ Dionysius usually prefers to call it an “uplifting” (ἀναγωγή) rather than an “ascent” (ἀνοδος), most probably because “ascent” fails to offer sufficient attention to the fact that is almost a passive process. Cf. Janet P. Williams, *Denying Divinity. Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004², p. 68.

²⁴ *De mystica theologia* I.3, 1000D (144.4-5 Heil/ Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 214).

²⁵ See *De mystica theologia* I.3, 1000C-1001A. Cf. Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God...*, p. 294-295. The believer cannot ascend to God through his own resources, but must be raised through language and the concepts revealed in the Scripture (cf. *De divinis nominibus* I.1) and through the guidance of ecclesial and celestial authorities. Therefore, *anagogy* is an essential hierarchical activity in Dionysius which includes not only the knowledge of God’s economy but also the entire sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. Cf. Janet P. William, *Denying Divinity...*, p. 68. The liturgical facets of the unifying experience from *Mystical Theology* are illustrated by A. Louth,

“And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing; in this he shuts out every knowing apprehension and comes to be in the wholly imperceptible and invisible, be-ing entirely of that beyond all – of nothing, neither himself nor another, united most excellently by the completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing – Καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρόντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφοντῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν, καθ’ ὄν ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις, καὶ ἐντῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ γίγνεται, πᾶς ὄντος πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ οὐδενός, οὔτε ἑαυτοῦ οὔτε ἑτέρου, τῷ παντελῶς δὲ ἀγνώστῳτῆ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον ἐνούμενος καὶ τῷ μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκων”²⁶.

To complete the picture of ἀγνωσία in the Dionysian Corpus, we just have to appeal to a short excerpt from *Epistle I*. Showing explicitly the fact that the negation we are facing with is in terms of “*hyper*-having” (ὑπεροχικῶς) – and not of *deprivation* (ἀλλὰ μὴ κατὰ στέρησιν²⁷) –, Dionysius warns that “if someone sees God and has understood what has been seen, he has not seen God” – Καὶ εἴ τις ἰδὼν θεὸν συνῆκεν, ὃ εἶδεν, οὐκ αὐτὸν ἐώρακεν²⁸. The fact that “He is not known and He is not” – μὴ γινώσκεσθαι μὴ δὲ εἶναι²⁹ ensures to God the status of being “*hyper*-established *hyper* intellect and being” – ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ οὐσίαν ὑπὲρ ἰδρυμένος³⁰. And “the greatest all-complete *unknowing* is a knowledge of that *hyper* all that is known” – Καὶ ἡ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον παντελῆς ἀγνωσία γνῶσις ἐστὶ τοῦ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ γινωσκόμενα³¹.

Ysabel de Andia is the one who makes an inventory of the various meanings of the terms γνῶσις and ἀγνωσία:

Denys the Areopagite, p. 101 sq.

²⁶ *De mystica theologia* 1001A (144.9-15 Heil/ Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 214).

²⁷ *Epistulae I*, 1065A (156.5 Heil/ Ritter).

²⁸ *Epistulae I*, 1065A (156.8-157.1 Heil/ Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 225).

²⁹ *Epistulae I*, 1065A (157.2-3 Heil/ Ritter).

³⁰ *Epistulae I*, 1065A (157.2 Heil/ Ritter).

³¹ *Epistulae I*, 1065A (157.3-5 Heil/ Ritter) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 225).

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There is a difference between *ignorance* (ἄγνοια)³² and *unknowing* (ἄγνωσία) which corresponds to the distinction between σκότος³³ (obscurity *qua* deprivation of light) and γνόφος³⁴ (darkness *qua* superabundance of light)³⁵.

The theme of unknowing reminds us of the famous phrase of Augustine, *Deus scitur melius nesciendo* – “God is better known by *not* knowing Him”, and it is part of the Apophatic Tradition. The fact that ἄγνωσία carries an alpha privative suggests that its word should be treated as a standard negative. *Unknowing* refers to an original, higher, form of knowledge. More specifically, a negative concept is intended to conceal a positive one: the unknowing of the initiate into the divine heights is, in fact, a *higher* form of knowing. This type of *hypernegation* was implemented

³² Cf. *De divinis nominibus* IV.6, 701B (150.8-12 Suchla): “As ignorance (ἄγνοια) is divided from those who err, the presence of intellectual light (νοητοῦ φωτός) binds together, unifies, and completes those who are illumined and returns them to what really is (τὸ ὄντως ὄν)” (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 138).

³³ Dionysius establishes a relationship between σκότος and ἄγνοια in chapter IV of *The Divine Names*, where he describes the progressive illumination from intelligible Light. *De divinis nominibus* IV.5, 700D (149.9-15 Suchla): “Now it is necessary that we celebrate and discuss the name *intellectual light* in reference to the good. For, the good is said to be intellectual light because it fills the *hyper*-celestial intellects with intellectual light. It dispels all ignorance and error in those souls in which it comes to be, and gives to all these souls a share of the sacred light. It cleanses their spiritual eyes of the mist of ignorance which encompasses them” – Νῦν δὲ τὴν νοητὴν τὰγαθοῦ φωτωνυμίαν ἡμῖν ὑμνητέον καὶ ῥητέον, ὅτι φῶς νοητὸν ὁ ἀγαθὸς λέγεται διὰ τὸ πάντα μὲν ὑπερουράνιον νοῦν ἐμπιμπλάναι νοητοῦ φωτός, πᾶσαν δὲ ἄγνοιαν καὶ πλάνην ἐλαύνειν ἐκ πασῶν, αἷς ἀνέγγένηται ψυχαῖς, καὶ πάσαις αὐταῖς φωτὸς ἱεροῦ μεταδιδόναι καὶ τοὺς νοερούς αὐτῶν ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀποκαθαίρειν τῆς περικειμένης αὐταῖς ἐκτῆς ἀγνοίας ἀγλῦος (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 137, modified). He places σκότος and φῶς into opposition, in the *First Epistle* to Gaius: “Darkness disappears in the light...” – Τὸ σκότος ἀφανὲς γίνεται τῷ φωτί (*Epistulae* I, 1065A, 156.1 Heil/ Ritter; trans. C. Luibheid and P. Rorem, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J., 1987, p. 263). But if there is *ignorance* that is inferior to knowledge, there must be also *unknowing* that is superior to knowledge, as indicated by the text, in chapter VII.

³⁴ See J. LeMaitre, *Préhistoire du concept de gnophos*, in “Dictionnaire de spiritualité, s.v. contemplation”, vol. II, Beauchesne, Paris, 1953, cols. 1868-1872.

³⁵ Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 418. On differences, cf. also J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 168 sq.

by Proclus who emphasized the positive reverse of the negative statement³⁶. Regarding the issue of darkness and cloud, H.-Ch. Puech³⁷ situates the *Mystical Theology* in the continuous perspective of Patristic tradition but claims that it would lack “the dramatic, emotional character that the *Night* acquires in experimental mystics, and purifying love does not seem to establish its depths”; instead, in St Gregory of Nyssa, “the loving and despairing outcome of the Infinite Object is depicted with emphasis and emotion, which give the impression of something experienced”³⁸.

Ysabel de Andia³⁹ discusses two points that separate her from J. Vanneste who had become supportive of the ideas of H.-Ch. Puech: firstly, his ignorance on the role of love in the Dionysian mystical endeavour⁴⁰ and then his final statement on the fact that mystical theology is “a natural theology”⁴¹ (because there would be no “supernatural grace”⁴²) or “a natural mysticism”⁴³.

For Deirdre Carabine⁴⁴, “the metaphor of darkness is a Christian one, and Dionysius exploits it fully”, as it seems the best way to express the idea that “no senses are operative in the unity which lies at the summit of the apophatic journey.”

³⁶ R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence, vol. 2: The Way of Negation*, Hanstein, Bonn, 1986, p. 231.

³⁷ H.-Ch. Puech, *La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l'Areopagite et dans la tradition patristique*, in “En quête de la Gnose. 1: La Gnose et le temps et autres essais”, Galimard, Paris, 1978, p. 119-141.

³⁸ H.-Ch. Puech, “La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l'Areopagite et dans la tradition patristique”, p. 141.

³⁹ Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 417, n. 80.

⁴⁰ J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 214.

⁴¹ J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 221.

⁴² J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 222.

⁴³ J. Vanneste, p. 224. In his study, “Mysticism and Transcendence in Later Neoplatonism” (*Hermes*, vol. 92, no. 2, 1964, p. 219-220), J.M. Rist raises the problem whether Dionysius’ mysticism can be classified as “natural” mysticism and concludes that, in terms of Plotinus’ position on this matter, it is considerably less “natural”. For an interpretation of “negative theology” and of Neoplatonic and Dionysian mysticism based on rational metaphysics, see E.D. Perl, *Theophany. The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, SUNY Press, New York, p. 5 sq. A possible answer to the dilemma “mystical experience or system of philosophy?” is to be found in: Jan Vanneste, *Is the Mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius Genuine*, in “International Philosophical Quarterly”, vol. 3, no. 2, 1963, p. 286-306.

⁴⁴ *The Unknown God...*, p. 296.

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VI. Lossky⁴⁵ considers, in his turn, that the darkness and ἀγνωσία contain a double reference for Dionysius – objective and subjective: the terms refer to the eternal unknowability of the divine essence and, also, the incapability of the soul to grasp God⁴⁶.

P. Spearritt⁴⁷ regarded the doctrine on ἀγνωσία as a bridge between Neoplatonic synthesis and Christian ascetical theology – with its traditional display of the Mosaic cloud –, and the fact that in Dionysius the expression of the experience is very sober “and almost disappears under the objectivity of the theological synthesis”, is not a big shortcoming.

Similarly, there are two types of knowledge (γνώσις) – a knowledge of beings and a knowledge that is the *unknowing* (ἀγνωσία).

Human knowledge is “knowledge of beings” (γνώσις τῶν ὄντων)⁴⁸, and the knowledge we can have of God is “analogical knowledge” (ἀναλογικὴ γνώσις) beginning with beings⁴⁹ or “knowledge of the true eros” – εἰς τὴν τοῦ ὄντος ἔρωτος γνώσιν⁵⁰. But God is, at the same time, the *Cause of all* beings and “He is not one of the things that are and He cannot be known in any of them” – Καὶ οὐκ ἔστι τι τῶν ὄντων, οὐδὲ ἐν τινὶ τῶν ὄντων γινώσκειται⁵¹.

⁴⁵ See *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1974, p. 31-43.

⁴⁶ The vision of the Russian theologian appears in dissonance with the opinion of J. Vanneste (*Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 222), for whom, “darkness in Dionysius would lack mystical content”.

⁴⁷ See *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, p. 156-157.

⁴⁸ Cf. *De divinis nominibus* I.4, 593A (115.16-18 Suchla): “For if all knowledge is of beings and has its limits in beings, then that beyond every being is *removed* from every knowledge” – Εἰ γὰρ αἰγνώσεις πάσαι τῶν ὄντων εἰσὶ καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄντα τὸ πέρασ ἔχουσιν, ἡ πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα καὶ πάσης γνώσεώς ἐστιν ἐξηρημένη (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 112, modified). Here, this type of *removing* – expressed by the verb ἐξαιρέω – has the sense of transcendence (cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, with a revised supplement, revised and augmented throughout by H.S. Jones, new (ninth) edition, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 581-582).

⁴⁹ *De divinis nominibus* V.9, 825A (188.16 Suchla) (cf. trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 170).

⁵⁰ *De divinis nominibus* IV.12, 709C (158.5 Suchla) (cf. trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 144).

⁵¹ *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872 A (198.7-8 Suchla) (cf. trans. Luibheid/ Rorem, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, p. 109).

This radical assertion of divine unknowability seems to contradict the one in the *Divine Names* V regarding the analogical knowledge. It induces the idea that knowledge of God would lack from the level of γνῶσις τῶν ὄντων. In fact, by the superlative ἡ θειοτάτη θεοῦ γνῶσις⁵², Dionysius marks the levels between analogical knowledge of God and “the most divine knowledge of God”⁵³.

“The most divine knowledge of God (ἡ θειοτάτη θεοῦ γνῶσις) is one which knows through unknowing (ἀγνωσίας) in the unity beyond intellect (ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἕνωσιν) when the intellect stands away from all beings (τῶν ὄντων πάντων) and then stands away from itself, it is united to the *hyper*-resplendent (ὑπερ φαέσιν) rays, and is then and there illumined by the inscrutable depths of wisdom”⁵⁴.

The transition from “(analogical) knowledge of God starting from existences” to another, “most divine” knowledge, which is “*unknowing* in the unity beyond Intellect” requires the separation between “the Intellect of all beings” (ὁ νοῦς τῶν ὄντων πάντων ἀποστάς⁵⁵) and “the abstraction of all beings” (τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων ἀφαιρέσεως⁵⁶) – negation that is achieved by the separation of the Intellect from all existences⁵⁷. This has as correspondent the peak of the ascent – or of the mountain. But the mystical union is only accomplished at the moment when the Intellect separates from itself, by entering into the Divine Darkness. It is no longer about the peak of the Intellect, but about the *ekstasis* of the Intellect⁵⁸, and this type of “going out of itself” and this accession to God are the ones who allow it to know God not by Himself but by the union⁵⁹ itself, to know God *in* God

⁵² Cf. *De divinis nominibus* IV.11, 708D; VII.1, 865C.

⁵³ Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 419.

⁵⁴ *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872B (198.12-15 Suchla) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 179, modified).

⁵⁵ *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872B (198.13 Suchla).

⁵⁶ *De mystica theologia* II, 1025A (145.4-5 Heil/ Ritter).

⁵⁷ According to the interpretation of J. Vanneste, the type of purification supported by Dionysius would be, primarily, *intellectual* – and not *moral*; thereby, Vanneste deduces that the practice of *aphairesis* would not be a Christian one. See J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 230. Cf. Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God...*, p. 295, n. 80.

⁵⁸ by which Dionysius seems closer to Plotinus than to Proclus.

⁵⁹ The union of the soul with God is based on a relationship that is beyond sense perception and intellection, and this is where Dionysius uses the notion of *ecstasy*. The ascent of the soul involves meeting the divine mystery in a way that involves blinding

AGNŌSIA: The Apophatic Experience of God in Dionysius the Areopagite and through God. This is “the most divine knowledge” *qua* unknowing⁶⁰. In the interpretation he makes to the “union in unknowing”, J. Vanneste⁶¹ takes into account three moments of the mystical endeavour: ἀφαίρεσις, ἀγνωσία, and ἕνωσις, but they seem questionable⁶².

As a first argument, it can be argued that this range is not based on any Dionysian text and differs from the description in classical terms of the three ways: purification, illumination, and union⁶³.

Thereafter, the fact that ἀγνωσία is placed on the second level gives it only a mediatorial function in reaching the final state of union. But this term does not only constitute an intermediate state which must be overcome in the end but is itself a model of the union. ἀγνωσία and ἕνωσις are necessary to obtain deification and divine knowledge.

There is simultaneity between “going out of itself” and “belonging to God”, between ecstasy and the union with God:

“In this, therefore, we are not to comprehend God according to us, but we are to stand the whole of ourselves outside of the whole of ourselves, so that we come to be wholly of God. For it is great to be of God and not of ourselves. For thus shall what is divine be given to those who come to be with God – Κατὰ ταύτην οὖν τὰ θεῖα νοητέον οὐ καθ’ ἡμᾶς, ἀλλ’ ὅλους ἑαυτοὺς ὅλων ἑαυτῶν ἐξισταμένους καὶ ὅλους θεοῦ γιγνομένους, κρεῖττον γὰρ

of vision because of an *excess* of light: *i.e.* the soul (and its abilities) is overwhelmed by divine light precisely because of the manifestation of divine presence. In this context, Dionysius resorts to oxymoronic images as preliminary means of adopting: a) the negative movement of *decoupling* from sensible/ intelligible and b) the movement of *superceding* both sensible/ intelligible objects, and cognitive acts of negation. See Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia* I.1, 997A-997B. Cf. T.K. Ohara, *The Internal Logic of Plotinian and Dionysian Apophasis*, p. 246 and 245.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 420.

⁶¹ See *Le mystère de Dieu...*, p. 9, p. 201, and p. 219.

⁶² See Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 417, and p. 417, n. 80.

⁶³ On the tripartite division of the mystical way in the form: purification, illumination, contemplation, see Rosemary Ann Lees, *The Negative Language of the Dionysian School of Mystical Theology. An Approach to the Cloud of Unknowing*, vol. I, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of York, Centre of Medieval Studies, 1981, p. 39-71.

εἶναι θεοῦ καὶ μὴ ἑαυτῶν. Οὕτω γὰρ ἔσται τὰ θεῖα δοτὰ τοῖς μετὰ θεοῦ γινομένοις”⁶⁴.

This statement is of prime importance because it dictates the relationship between union, ecstasy, and deification in Dionysius. Union lies in the union of the Intellect with divine realities *beyond* Intellect and, thus, it can only be done, in de Andya’ words, “par cette dépossession de soi et possession par Dieu” – which is the *ecstasy*. Finally, God must be thought of by this union – and not by self – “en devenant *de* Dieu, en étant *à* Dieu et *avec* Dieu”⁶⁵.

The movement of the “blinded” soul that “throws itself” (ἐπιβάλλειν) against the rays of the divine darkness into *agnosia*⁶⁶ is literally a movement of *ekstasis*, and corresponds to the loving *ekstasis* of God in his bountiful procession into all things⁶⁷.

It also constitutes the key to the decisive moment of the mystical experience in Dionysius, as it crosses the border between knowing and unknowing, intellection and union. This casting of oneself occurs “instantaneously” (ἐξαιφνης⁶⁸) – the same term used by Plotinus⁶⁹ to express the nature of the ecstasy.

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Dionysius’ lines of thinking on union *beyond* Intellect, deification, and unknowing *qua* “the most divine knowledge” converge towards

⁶⁴ *De divinis nominibus* VII.1, 865D-868A (194.12-15 Suchla) (trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 176).

⁶⁵ Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 421.

⁶⁶ Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia* I.1.

⁶⁷ Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De caelesti hierarchia* I.1.

⁶⁸ See Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistulae* III, 1069B (159 Heil/ Ritter). This word was also used by Plato, *Epistulae* VII, 341C-D. Cf. Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God...*, p. 296 and p. 296, n. 86. On ἐξαιφνης in *Epistle* III, see A. Golitzin, *Revisiting the Sudden: Epistle III in the Corpus Dionysiacum*, in “*Studia Patristica*”, vol. 37, 2001, p. 482-491. In the case of Dionysius, the term would suggest, according to Golitzin, both the dogmatic mystery of God who became a man, *and* the personal mystery of meeting: we “instantaneously” meet in Christ the transcendent God. See A. Golitzin, *The mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite: Platonist or Christian?*, in “*Mystics Quarterly*”, vol. 19, no. 3, 1993, p. 108 sq.

⁶⁹ *Enneads* 6.7.36.15-21.

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this axis of his thinking which is the ἔνωσις: there is knowledge of God only in union, deification and ecstasy, in this unique movement of “going out of itself” and belonging to God, where love and knowledge are reunited⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ Indeed, this double movement of ecstasy is recorded in *De divinis nominibus* (VII.3, 872B, 198.13-14 Suchla: “when the intellect stands away from beings and then stands away from itself” – ὅταν ὁ νοῦς τῶν ὄντων πάντων ἀποστάς, ἔπειτα καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀφεί [trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 179]) – and at the end of Dionysius addressing Timothy, in the first chapter of the *Mystical Theology* – where Dionysius says that: “by the irrepressible and absolving *ecstasis* of yourself and of all, absolved from all, and going away from all, you will be purely raised up to the rays of the divine darkness beyond being” – τῇ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ πάντων ἀσχέτῳ καὶ ἀπολύτῳ καθαρῶς ἐκοστάσει πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θείου σκοτούς ἀκτίνα, πάντα ἀφελὼν καὶ ἐκ πάντων ἀπολυθεὶς, ἀναχθήσῃ (*De mystica theologia* I, 998B-1000A, 142.9-11 Heil/ Ritter; trans. J.D. Jones, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, p. 211-212). Cf. Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis...*, p. 421.