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On Dionysian Theological Methodology

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and Seminary of
Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Theology (Th.M.)

SAINT JOHN'S SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND SEMINARY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota
November 28, 2017

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Introduction

The interest in the thought of the unidentified writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius (hereafter referred to as Dionysius) has rapidly gained momentum over the past century particularly through the advent of postmodern thought. Debate has raged in the field of specifically French philosophy as to whether or not the theological method of Dionysius sidesteps the charge of unduly proposing a metaphysical position despite attempts to limit theological language. The scene has included philosophers Jean-Luc Marion arguing in the affirmative and Jacques Derrida claiming that the Dionysian method of talking about God is merely more metaphysics, "metaphysics" being the primary byword in postmodern philosophical thought. In the theological world, the question as to the orthodoxy and usefulness of Dionysius, particularly in light of these philosophical debates, likewise has been relevant. Is Dionysius merely a Neoplatonic wolf in Christian clothing, or is he (or she) Christian enough to consult when it comes to determining the proper usage of theology?[1] Does the apophaticism of Dionysius, when accepted, constitute a fundamental obstacle for any affirmative theological project?

All of these contemporary interests in Dionysius swirl around a few important questions that any theologian should consider: Can we know anything about God in this life? What is the extent of possible knowledge concerning the divine, given the revelation of Scripture and Christ Incarnate? It is sometimes thought that Dionysius disparages the use of concepts that refer to God and his attributes, and therefore of any positive statement about theology. In response, the goal of my paper is to clarify precisely what the Dionysian method is, how it values affirmative theology as good and necessary, and

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[1] Examples of the former include classically Martin Luther and, more recently, noted Dionysian scholar Paul Rorem. These perspectives, along with that of Marion and Derrida, will be discussed below.

how Dionysius and two later important theologians within the Christian tradition, the medieval Thomas Aquinas and the modern Hans Urs von Balthasar, have used the Dionysian method in ways that display its epistemological and religious usefulness in doing theology. The Dionysian method used in his mystical theology, particularly as highlighted through the interpretive and appropriative lenses of affirmative theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Hans Urs von Balthasar, offers a way for an appraisal of affirmative theology as valuable and essential, while simultaneously ranking it as the first means to the supreme end of Christian life and practice. This supreme end is being in right relationship with God Himself, rather than knowledge of God. For Dionysius, concepts are merely a stepping-stone on the path of relating to God who is beyond all knowledge.

<center>Excursus on Terminology</center>

Further clarification is in order. What exactly is meant by a "Dionysian method" or a "Dionysian methodology"? Without overstepping what will be shown below, the Dionysian method consists of two parts, one part being founded upon the other. The foundational part of the Dionysian method is a particular theology proper, that is, a particular way of conceptualizing the fundamental nature of God. It is no surprise to the initiated that Dionysius is famous for influencing the trend in Christian theology known as apophatic theology, or the *via negativa* as is sometimes called in the West. This theological tendency is fundamentally aware that, though kataphatic (or "positive" or "affirmative") theology is able to bring the believer to a gracious amount of knowledge concerning the divine and his works, there is nonetheless a limit on what language and concepts can properly grasp about God's nature or essence. God's transcendence implies

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that his vastness is incomprehensible by thought or word.[2] Therefore, for apophatic theology the emphasis is to respect and be mindful of the fundamental limits of language when discussing a transcendent God. However, this does not imply that kataphatic language is thereby to be sloughed off completely. Instead, there is an intimate play between what is revealed in kataphatic theology and what kataphatic theology fails to truly comprehend through language. One cannot develop an apophatic consciousness unless prompted through an affirmative statement on who God is and what can be known about him. Fundamentally, the Dionysian method begins with the affirmation that the immanent God who reveals in authoritative revelation and even through Christ Himself also is the transcendent God that reason and language cannot possibly bring to a full comprehension for the believer.

The second part of the Dionysian method, founded on this apophatic conception of God, is what I will call a meta-theology. This meta-theology tries to ask the question, "What are we to do with theology in light of this fact? What is the purpose of doing theology if God is ultimately beyond our ability to fully conceive of him?" The answer for the meta-theology of the Dionysian method is not found in merely coming to a better academic understanding of God. Though coming to an understanding has inherent value (again, the respect of kataphatic theology is still meaningful), the apophatic end of the Dionysian theology gives little reason to suspect that such an effort as a final end will be fulfilled. In fact, gaining knowledge can never be an end for orthodox Christianity, since,

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[2] By incomprehensible, it is meant in a more etymological sense that knowledge of God cannot be fully contained in man's search to understand him at least in this life.

according to the apostle Paul, "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).[3]

Knowledge is a tool, a catalyst, a jumping-off point for something else. In the Christian

life, that something else is a relationship of praise to God. Praise is the ultimate reaction

to a God that is revealed and yet also exceeds all that is revealed immeasurably. This is

the final end and goal of all theology, kataphatic and apophatic. It will be shown below

that one can certainly find this method in the Dionysian corpus. Though Aquinas was

inherently seeing Dionysius through Western scholastic eyes, yet he nonetheless had in

mind the Dionysian method, particularly its consequences for a theological epistemology.

Balthasar, on the other hand, was more keenly aware of the aesthetic dimensions that

drive theology to its proper Dionysian end. Both efforts to appropriate the Dionysian

method were thus instances of what Balthasar might call "seeing the form"[4] of the

Dionysian method from their own cultural and temporal contexts, all while this form

informs their distinct affirmative theological projects.

Scholarly Oppositions

One consequence of Dionysius' apparent subordination of affirmative theological

statements is that many read him to consider theological speech and systematization as

inferior or unbecoming of the true spiritual person. For example, Charles Taliaferro and

Chad Meister appear to view Dionysius as such. In their masterful introductory work

Contemporary Philosophical Theology, they define philosophical theology as involving

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[3] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New Revised Standard Version*.

[4] This is in reference to volume one of Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*, which is entitled *Seeing the Form*. This will be expounded upon further below. As a preemptive summary of this turn of phrase, Aquinas and Balthasar see one and the same phenomenon that is the Dionysian method through different historical, cultural, and theological perspectives.

"…critical, disciplined reflection on the concept of God or the divine."[5] For Taliaferro and Meister, the nature of the enterprise of philosophical theology is such that it can be practiced "…both on the inside or the outside" of the particular religious tradition examined; philosophical theology can be done within the context of belief in a particular concept of God, or on the outside of said context, whether critical or sympathetic. Following this definition, they begin to address objections to the prospect of doing philosophical theology, and it is their addressing of the problem of mystery, and in particular their apparent characterization of the position of Dionysius on this topic, that we will turn to now.

Taliaferro and Meister quote Dionysius from his longest work entitled *The Divine Names*, which I will repeat here: "Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name."[6] From the display of this quote, Taliaferro and Meister have implicitly interpreted Dionysius as being among those throughout history who say that all rational inquiry concerning the nature and attributes of God is fruitless and inappropriate. After accurately describing apophatic theology as "theology that stresses the unknowability of God," they set up the remainder of their chapter on mystery by posing these important questions:

> But must all discourse of the divine be by way of negation? Is it impossible to talk about God? Is philosophical theology a contradiction in terms? While we have sympathies for the apophatic theological tradition, we also take to heart the words

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[5] Charles Taliaffero and Chad Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), loc. 69-76, Kindle.

[6] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 49-50.

of the Apostle Paul: "I believed, and so I spoke" (2 Corinthians 4: 13). And we affirm the value of Anselm's motto, *fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding"), taken not to mean that theological understanding must be based on an irrational intellectual leap, but rather to mean an active trust that is seeking a deeper understanding of God and the ways of God. This is a faith that is open to critique and criticism, and open to rethinking and reimagining as is intellectually warranted.[7]

But how accurate is this assessment of negative theology, particularly as it applies to Dionysius? It is telling that the book from which the quote is derived, *The Divine Names*, is a book discussing fundamental predicates of God found in and legitimated by revelation. However, this quote from Dionysius tends to leave the impression that such discourse is ultimately futile and even unsuitable in relation to divine majesty. In his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius also says of God, "It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth."[8] Why, then, does he write a discourse on the *Divine Names*, and even mentions (hitherto undiscovered) texts he has written, such as the *Theological Representations*, which have "…praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology"?[9] Charles K. Robinson has also painted a similar picture as Taliaferro and Meister regarding Dionysius in particular in his article "Theological Predication in the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas." Robinson asks, "In regard to Dionysius, the fundamental question is, what is the Ultimate Being which is the object of his approach?"[10] He answers, "It would be a remarkable piece of

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[7] Taliaferro and Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, loc. 909-915, Kindle.

[8] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *Complete Works*, 141.

[9] Ibid., 138.

[10] Charles K. Robinson, "Theological Predication in the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas," *Anglican Theological Review* 46, no. 3 (1964): 304, accessed February 7, 2017, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=34&sid=f82f1ea1-4a7a-49f5-a7be-b834d1af4a12%40sessionmgr120&hid=118.

understatement to say that it is not the personal, self-revealing God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, it is quite impossible to say what he is approaching. There is no need of laboring this point further. The very heart of mysticism is its renunciation of all content."[11] But is this also clearly indicated by the Dionysian corpus and the context from which it arose? Is Dionysius fundamentally interested in a renunciation of all content?

The central goal of this discussion is to contrast this excessively apophatic view of Dionysius with a more nuanced portrait of his theological method. In order to clear up these apparent discrepancies and bring clarity regarding the Dionysian project, it will first be necessary to look at the Dionysian corpus as a whole, and only then can we develop a coherent picture of Dionysius' vision for doing theology. It will become apparent that Taliaferro's and Meister's concerns about Dionysius are only partially correct at best, and that fully understanding his method for doing theology and setting theology's place within the Christian life will show just exactly what value Dionysius places on affirmative theological statements.

Dionysius and his Methodology

Introduction

It is of first importance to provide adequate historical background information on the nature of the body of work associated with Dionysius. This is integral not only for understanding the content of the Dionysian corpus, but also for understanding how Dionysius has been received throughout history. Once this foundation is in place, I will exposit the theological epistemology contained within the corpus, focusing primarily on

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[11] Robinson, "Theological Predication in the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas," 304-5.

the limited yet necessary appraisal of affirmative theology within the thought process of Dionysius.

Historical Background

First, the "Pseudo-" part in the relatively modern name given to Dionysius should be explained. For centuries up until the time of the Renaissance, the Dionysian corpus was believed by many to have been written by Dionysius the Areopagite, who was one of the few converted to Christianity by Paul after speaking in the Areopagus in Acts 17:34. However, it has since been confirmed that the writer of the Dionysian corpus was, in fact, not the Pauline convert. The primary reason for casting doubt upon the idea that the first century Dionysius the Areopagite wrote the Dionysian corpus was the anachronistic Neoplatonic (and particularly Proclean) flavor that pervades the corpus. It is clear that Proclus, who was a Neoplatonic philosopher that existed around three centuries after the original Dionysius would have lived, heavily influenced our Pseudo-Dionysius. For example, Proclus was heavily interested in mediations between the One and the many, often taking the flavor of triads that link the myriad things distinct from the One.[12] This Proclean view of triadic mediation is apparent in Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*, where angels are grouped in triads that mediate between God and humanity, as well as the triadic, mediating nature of bishops, priests, and deacons found in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[13]

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[12] See Radek Chlup, *Proclus: an Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125-127; R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Bristol Classic Press), 153-54.

[13] See Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52; Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 13.

There have been a number of suspects throughout the history of Dionysian research for the identity of the pseudonymous author. There has been general agreement that the author would have written probably in the early sixth century, due to the late Neoplatonic influences as well as aspects of the letter that reflect the mixed reactions to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. There is a distinctly Antiochene flavor in Dionysian Christology that some have argued implies a monophysite view akin to Severus of Antioch.[14] Historically, some have even suggested that Severus himself may be a prime suspect for being Dionysius.[15] Despite these conjectures, little can be known with confidence as to who Dionysius was. All that we know is that he is not the Dionysius of the Book of Acts as previously thought.

What, then, is the significance of our pseudonymous writer taking on the name of Dionysius the Areopagite? Again, no certain answer can be ascertained, but there is one answer that appears to be most plausible when one considers the nature of the contents of the Dionysian corpus. There is good reason to think that the choice of the pen name Dionysius the Areopagite was quite deliberate. In Acts 17, the biblical Dionysius is converted after Paul's speech to the philosophers at the Areopagus, and the primary theme of this speech was proclaiming the unknown god as the God of the Christians. On one hand, this pseudonym reflects the fact that the imports of pagan philosophy that have truth to them can and should be used by the Christian to clarify and promote the gospel. As Andrew Louth puts it, "The pseudonym expressed the author's belief that the truths that Plato grasped belong to Christ, and are not abandoned by embracing faith in

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[14] Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 13-14.

[15] Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 12-13.

Christ."[16] [17] On the other hand, the theme of an unknown god will become apparent as the theme of apophaticism in the Dionysian corpus is explored.

Overview of the Dionysian Corpus

The extant works that are comprised of the Dionysian corpus consist of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Divine Names*, the *Mystical Theology*, and ten writings stylized as letters addressed to various monks, deacons, priests, and bishops. The *Celestial Hierarchy* is fundamentally about the role of angels as mediators between the One and mankind as well as their triadic ranks defined in the manner of order within the hierarchy, form of understanding conveyed to lower ranks, and activity by which they may become as much like God as possible for their rank.[18] The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* then lays out similarly triadic church authorities that are bishops, then priests, then deacons, each ecclesial rank having a similar threefold manner of definition as the celestial ranks. However, most of the discussion below will center around Dionysius' two main theological treatises, the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology*, as well as various important statements found in the letters.

It is also worth noting that there are several works by Dionysius that are alluded to in his writings that we either have not discovered or that have never existed. Among these, the ones most applicable to our discussion include the *Theological Representations*, in which Dionysius claims to have "…praised the notions which are

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[16] Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 11.

[17] One may also note Charles Stang's interpretation of Dionysius' pseudonymity that implies both Paul's desire to bring philosophy and Christianity together at the Areopagus as well as intimating an interest in Pauline apophatic anthropology. See Charles M. Stang, "Dionysius, Paul, and the Significance of the Pseudonym," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2009), 11-26, Kindle.

[18] Rorem, *Dionysius*: *A Commentary*, 57.

most appropriate to affirmative theology," and the *Symbolic Theology*, where Dionysius claims to have "…discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive."[19] The nature of these two undiscovered or fictitious works by Dionysius (particularly the *Theological Representations*) will eventually play an important role in clarifying Dionysian methodology and the role of theological affirmations.

The *Divine Names*

The *Divine Names* is the longest of all of Dionysius' extant treatises, and it deals primarily in discussing the use and validity of the common names for God found in the Bible, such as light, good, or beautiful, as well as more fundamental metaphysical names such as being or life. It is here in this treatise that the appraisal of kataphatic theology is most apparent. It is here that one ought to begin consulting before approaching the *Mystical Theology* in order to have a well-rounded understanding of Dionysius' apophatic methodology. The reason for this suggestion will be made clear further below once the ideas contained in the *Divine Names* have been established.

The primary backbone of the methodology found in the *Divine Names* is found in divine revelation. In his introduction addressed to Timothy, Dionysius says,

> Here… let us hold on to the scriptural rule that when we say anything about God, we should set down the truth "not in the plausible words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the power granted by the Spirit" to the scripture writers, a power by which, in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or intellect. This is why we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed.[20]

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[19] Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *The Complete Works*, 138-139.

[20] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 49.

This foundation in revelation is crucial for Dionysius' attempt at discourse concerning divine names and attributes. The statements of Scripture, according to Dionysius, are not only the source of knowledge when it comes to adequate divine names, but it is also the primary authority for the validity of discussing divine names from a human perspective. Dionysius qualifies his statement that "…we must not dare to apply words or conceptions to this hidden transcendent God" by also saying, "We can use only what scripture has disclosed."[21] He goes on to say that, though God is ultimately unsearchable and inscrutable, He is also "…not absolutely incommunicable to everything."[22] For Dionysius, the Bible supplies the theologian with the appropriate terms and names that one may use to refer to that God who is ultimately unknowable and unspeakable. An implication of this reality is the fact that names and attributes can be used to point to God because the Bible, as revelation from God, says that it is valid. Dionysius intends for this limitation to be more prescriptive than restrictive. Dionysius also states in the same chapter, "For, if we may trust the superlative wisdom and truth of scripture, the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness is such that, out of concern for our salvation, it deals out the immeasurable and infinite in limited measures."[23] For Dionysius, not only is Scripture prescriptive of the prospect of finding finite information about God through the study of all things, but also God has accomplished this revealing primarily for soteriological reasons. In this scheme, the Bible as revelation remains the fundamental means by which we may be permitted to possess names for God found through meditating on special and natural revelation, while

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[21] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 50.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

simultaneously justifying those who accurately (and accidentally) endeavored in this task apart from knowledge generated from special revelation.

What is further, the authors of revelation "…praise [God] by every name—and as the Nameless One."[24] Since God is the Cause of all, even of being itself, one may, in a way, attribute to God every name given to all things, since all things bear the mark of their creator. From this it is clear where Dionysius has justification for composing a text like the *Symbolic Theology*. Since the Scriptures make claims for the perceivability of God's power in creation (particularly in passages such as Romans 1:18-23), there is legitimacy behind the endeavor of giving names to God, though ultimately his essence is beyond word or concept.[25] Because God chose to disclose truths about himself through natural and special revelation, the truth of God's radically transcendent essence does not contradict the importance and efficacy of theological knowledge and research.

Throughout the *Divine Names*, the operating pattern appears to be that the kataphatic and the apophatic are two sides of the same coin. Dionysius finds it worthwhile in chapter two to articulate a clear understanding about divine unity in relation to Trinitarian doctrine, yet finally recognizing the supra-conceptual nature of the Triune Deity.[26] In chapter four, Dionysius even attempts to give a working definition of God as the Good, all while also arguing that evil is not a substance.[27] He even tries to

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[24] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 54.

[25] Ibid., 75.

[26] Ibid., 58-61.

[27] Ibid., 71-84.

give an answer to the problem of evil, a task that is clearly done by kataphatic

theologians and philosophers throughout centuries.[28]

From these examples and more within the *Divine Names*, it is clear that Dionysius

is not against affirmative statements about God and his attributes, nor does he view

conceptual system building as superfluous or unfruitful. Yet, for Dionysius, this does not

contradict the fact that God is ultimately unknowable and indescribable in his essence.

Dionysius addresses the problem of reconciling the two impulses this way:

> It might be more accurate to say that we cannot know God in his nature, since this
> is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or reason. But we know him from
> the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out
> from him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine
> paradigms. We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities
> allow us and we pass by way of denial and the transcendence of all things and by
> way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct
> from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing.[29]

From this passage, it is apparent that some sort of causal "top-down" knowledge

extending from creature to Creator can be both attainable (within its limits) and useful for

the Christian life.[30] For Dionysius, it is fitting that a Christian should gaze upon the

whole of creation and come to some sort of conclusion, however partial, about the nature

of God, since God is revealed as Cause in the Scriptures. And yet, there is also a way of

denying all attributes of God as inadequate that is also appropriate for the Christian, even

"more accurate" than the affirmative way. How do these two different paths relate to one

another? Are they purely equal in the eyes of Dionysius, or is there some sort of

hierarchy between the two? Dionysius will develop further clarification on these

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[28] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 84-96.

[29] Ibid., 108-109.

[30] The Platonic elements that are in play in this quote and others will be discussed below. For now, it will suffice to say that the reality of God's revelation through nature does not necessarily depend on an emanationist interpretation of Dionysius' doctrine of creation.

questions if we look at his next crucial treatise on the knowledge of God entitled the *Mystical Theology*.

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The *Mystical Theology*

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The *Mystical Theology* is the shortest single treatise that Dionysius produced (besides the various letters attributed to him). It is also the ultimate expression of the complete Dionysian method found within the extant body of his written work. With the background of the value judgments concerning the positive and negative ways to knowledge of God found in the *Divine Names*, we will be able to further clarify the fundamental theological epistemology that is at the backbone of what Dionysius is attempting to say and unsay about God.

Again, in the *Mystical Theology* the fundamental operative term and placeholder for representing the divine relationship to all things is that of *Cause*. This is the fulcrum by which affirmative statements can be made through reason and empirical evidence. As Dionysius states, "Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings…"[31] However, Dionysius indicates a sense in which it is "more appropriate" to "negate all these affirmations, since it [God] surpasses all being."[32] From this subtle shift in his language, the beginnings of a Dionysian apophatic method can be developed. Dionysius ultimately begins with the affirmative statement, particularly through observing the physical world and pondering metaphysical questions such as the nature of being. However, it is proper and necessary to then deny these positive attributes developed through these conceptual means. Since

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[31] Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 136.

[32] Ibid.

the essence of God is ultimately unknowable and beyond the reach of man's finite thinking, there is theological reason for suspicion for the accuracy of concepts about the nature of God. Thus, for example, Dionysius states that we must say that God is the Cause of all the physical world, containing the potentiality of all the universe within his divine nature,[33] yet surely most orthodox Christian theologians would agree with him that materiality would be denied of God.[34] However, Dionysius would take this itinerary of denial further towards the realm of considerably more fundamental assertions about God. He comes to the conclusion that we must ultimately deny of God the quality of life, mind, understanding, power, and even being.[35] God cannot be grasped and comprehensively understood by the human mind, and thus our theoretical concepts about the divine nature, however accurate, never truly pass for a thorough or complete picture of it. The movement of denial of all our affirmations about God is ultimately recognition that the ideas and pictures of God we create in our minds are inadequate when measured up to the actual infinity of the divine.

It may help to further develop this negative move from the positive way by way of Dionysius' Neoplatonic image of downward and upward movements in relation to God. The downward movement, which corresponds to the "top-down" process of affirmative theology, moves from the Cause to its effects, making the Cause more knowable through garnering information about Him by going from the highest and most divine effects (such as the ranks of angels) all the way down to the most simple, least

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[33] See Chapter Four of the *Divine Names* for an extended discussion of this point.

[34] "It [The Cause of all] is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight." In Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 140-41.

[35] "It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding…It has no power, is not power, nor is it light…It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being." In Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 141.

divine-resembling physical objects. In his description of his non-extant *Theological Representations* and the *Symbolic Theology* discussed briefly in his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius states that this form of argument "…traveled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this downward path an ever increasing number of ideas which multiplied with every stage of the descent."[36] This downward descent thus takes all of the properties garnered through rational examination and attributes all of their potentialities to the Cause that contains them. However, to limit the scope of God's nature to being Cause of Being and all beings is to fail to do justice to the whole infinite nature that God possesses. Dionysius is not convinced that the landscape of our legitimate attributes about God approved by his revelation are meant to give us a totalizing picture of God's essence, since the same revelation in Romans 9:33-34 asserts his unsearchableness and inscrutableness. Thus to form concepts about God are only the beginning of the theologian's task.

The next movement that must be done is the move upward towards the divine, thus leaving behind concepts generated through the previous downward process. Dionysius' describes the main move in the *Mystical Theology* as rising "…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."[37] The negations of otherwise useful affirmations about the nature of God is "more appropriate" in the sense that one may more adequately approach the divine through a humble recognition of the inadequacy of human concepts to comprehend the reality of the divine. For Dionysius, the true

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[36] Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 139.

[37] Ibid.

theologian does not rest satisfied in merely determining God through his relationship with creation. He compares the process of denial of all beings to the process of sculpting, where the sculptor "…removes every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden."[38] The goal of this denial is paradoxically to reveal somehow that which cannot be revealed, denying all things "…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."[39] This negative ascent, which begins with the more obvious denials such as that of God as air or stone, eventually ends with the more disorienting denials for most orthodox Christians, such as the denial of God the possession of goodness or life.[40]

Without any more qualifications on the nature of this upward ascent to the Cause of all beings, an obvious problem appears to defeat Dionysius' desire to negate affirmations.[41] To simply deny a particular affirmation does not mean that this negation cannot be cast alternatively as another affirmation. To say that God does not have being does not inevitably mean that God cannot have some sort of "supra-being" that merely has not been thought of or perceived by man. Thus, the critique goes, the negation ultimately falls back upon another affirmation. The negation of divinity for God entails the possession of a supra-divinity that likewise may or may not be conceptualized in theory; the denial of goodness merely concedes to a supra-goodness that has not, or

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[38] Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 138.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 140.

[41] Jacques Derrida, who will be discussed below, has raised this particular potential problem.

possibly cannot, be conceived by human beings. Thus, to understand Dionysius in this way entails that his negations merely land on a different, less graspable position that nonetheless can be used within an affirmative theological system. This would mean that Dionysius never truly takes off from the affirmative realm of theology after all.

In response, a further clarification needs to be made as to the negative segment of Dionysius' apophatic method. The negative aspect of Dionysius' method can, in fact, be split into two separate stages. The first of these stages is indeed that movement that is referred to by critics of Dionysian apophaticism. The affirmations made of God are first denied as strictly true, leaving open the interpretation as to what deliverance is left over from this denial. However, there is one final move that Dionysius makes after this second stage. This is the stage where ultimately language breaks down completely and is subsequently left behind. This "third way" is the final outcome of Dionysius' method. The *Mystical Theology* first hints at this breakdown of language through its opening prayer, where Dionysius prays to the Trinity, "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, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."[42] Elsewhere in the *Divine Names*, God is described as being "indivisible multiplicity" (a naturally Trinitarian notion) and "unfilled overfullness."[43] Denys Turner has rightly observed how the usage of paradoxical phraseology, such as "brilliant darkness" and the hidden silence of God's Word, reveal that there is more than a simple negation of positions in view for Dionysius, but rather "…the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered

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[42] Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 135.

[43] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works,* 67.

language, like the babble of a Jeremiah."[44] Language itself, according to Dionysius,

ultimately must be put aside through a deferral of words and concepts as means for

relating to God. Later on, Dionysius brings greater conceptual clarity to the nature of this

third way: "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."[45] Therefore, this third way is an

act, or maybe rather an event, that signifies a certain disposition or relationship towards

the One who is beyond affirmation and negation, beyond being and non-being, beyond

knowing and unknowing. Speaking of Moses' ascent, a theme often used since the time

of Origen to signify the ultimate mystical relationship with God, Dionysius describes the

third way in these terms: "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."[46] For Dionysius, the true theologian eventually leaves behind the

realm of position and negation altogether, moving beyond language once their usefulness

and limits have been exhausted.

What exactly is the nature of this third way, or, more specifically, what is its end

result? Naturally, the third way inherently defies linguistic conventions, since from it one

abandons the used of language and conception altogether. Dionysius is particularly

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[44] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22, Kindle.

[45] Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *The Complete Works*, 136.

[46] Ibid., 137.

cautious in using descriptions that are merely placeholders for the reality of this kind of relationship with God, saying that one will be "neither himself nor someone else." It is reasonable to assume that Dionysius simply has in mind a total union with or absorption into God as the end of the third way. However, this conclusion is too hasty. To imply a monistic union with God is to bring out a conceptual picture of the nature of the third way that is not balanced in Dionysius' sense. To be "neither himself nor someone else" does not make the state of being "supremely united to the completely unknown" a simple case of a Platonic unitive state. As Turner points out, "such an unbalanced emphasis on union at the expense of the distinct identity of the soul can claim no support whatever in the dialectics of Denys' apophaticism," for "…in the description of the soul's oneness with God we have no language, because that union transcends it, in which it would be possible to contrast the union of the lovers with their distinctness of identity."[47] A description of a person who is neither himself nor someone else is clearly another instance of the limits of language being met, much like the "brilliant darkness" in the opening prayer. The leaving behind of language entails the leaving behind of events or states that may be the proper domain of language.

This is not to say that there are no feasible ways of describing the third way. First, it can be said that the state of the third way is fundamentally relational. It is clear that some sort of direct "I-Thou" connection with God as the unknowable One is the goal and aim of this journey from the kataphatic to the apophatic. Andrew Louth even argues that, on top of the interpretation of the *Mystical Theology* as a model of personal mystical ascent found frequently in later appropriations, there are significant liturgical echoes within the book that detail the particular movements that the hierarch performs from the

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[47] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 46.

Scripture readings and hymns to the consecration of the hosts.[48] While Louth cites usage

of the Mosaic mystical ascent imagery in the *Mysical Theology* as an almost certain

indicator of influence from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* (and thus legitmating to an

extent the more personal mystical interpretations of the *Mystical Theology* prevalent in

the West), he also notes, "Several times in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* the hierarch's

experience of the liturgy is spoken of in terms that recall the language of the *Mystical

Theology* (especially I.3, which describes the ascent of Moses)."[49] It is clear that we must

not lose the forest through the trees. To deny that there is a movement towards God

happening through this apophatic effort would be to lose such a forest.

Second, there are two key words that serve as placeholders for the reality of the

third-way movement for Dionysius. The first, often repeated in the *Divine Names*, is the

word "praise."[50] The second, mentioned in the opening prayer and elsewhere in the

Mystical Theology, is "silence." "Praise" evokes from Dionysius a sense of aesthetic

appreciation for the divine. For him, the conceptual "top-down" movement where names

and attributes are generated of the divine serves the heart in its ascension through desire

and joyful pursuit. This is made even more obvious when one takes in the liturgical

context pointed out by Louth. Ideas are means by which the believer travels up in praise

to That which is beyond all word and conception. "Silence" is a trickier notion. It is

tempting to view the silence indicated in the *Mystical Theology* as merely the denial of

speech. Silence in the Dionysian corpus is likely better understood as the transcendence

of discourse and conceptuality altogether, rather than the opposite of the act of signifying

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[48] Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 101.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 54.

through word or thought. Dionysian silence ultimately corresponds with the realization

that communication about God reaches its epistemological limit in the face of the infinite,

and therefore is left behind in favor of dwelling in the mystical "I-Thou" relationship

indicated imperfectly and inadequately by discourse.

<p align="center">Objections concerning the Dionysian Theological Method</p>

From this discussion, certain lines of criticism might be raised. For one, there is

the resistance, particularly derived from Martin Luther and some of his followers, that the

obvious Neoplatonic influences behind Dionysius' apophaticism bring suspicion on his

theological method. Thus Luther says of Dionysius, "In the *Theologia Mystica*—rightly

so called—of which certain pretentious, but very unscholarly, theologians make so much,

Dionysius is very pernicious, being more of a Platonist than a Christian. In sum, I myself

do not want any believer to give the least weight to these books. So far indeed from

learning about Christ in them, you will be led to lose what you know."[51] This disposition

towards (and subsequent rejection of) Dionysius as a Platonist wolf in Christian clothing

lingers in many corners of Reformation theology to this day.[52]

Indeed, it would be absolutely fallacious to deny the significant influence of

Neoplatonic thought upon the Dionysian corpus. The theme of negative theology had

been developing in the Greek world within the context of increasing Platonic

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[51] Martin Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," trans. Bertram Lee Woolf, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1962) 343.

[52] It would be well to note that Platonism as such is not the primary critical target of Luther as such. The fundamental critique is that, for Luther, Dionysian apophaticism in its Platonic flavor fundamentally detracts from the soteriological truth of the gospel of Christ. Luther suggests this statement as an alternative to Dionysian theology: "Rather, let us listen to Paul, that we may learn of 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' [I Cor. 2:2]. 'He is the way, the truth, and the life' [John 14:6]. He is the ladder by which we may come to the Father; as He Himself said: 'No one cometh unto the Father, but by me.'" See Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church," in *Selections*, 343.

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otherworldliness at least since the time of Plato.[53] Plotinus (204-270 CE) was insistent

that "…we can and do state what it [the One] is not, while we are silent as to what it

is...unable to state it, we may still possess it."[54] Also like Dionysius, Plotinus made the

crucial qualification of negating the positive-negative distinction by putting the One

beyond word or concept. Speaking of the One, he remarks that "…neither rest nor

movement can belong to that which has no place in which either could occur; centre,

object, ground, all are alike unknown to it, for it is before all."[55] Many scholars have

debated whether Dionysius had any affiliation with the later Athenian School, since many

of their themes resonate within the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical

Hierarchy*.[56]

It would be also wrong, however, to disregard the influence of Platonic thought

on the vast majority of the development of the early orthodox church. One cannot ignore

the legacy of those like Justin Martyr and Origen on this point. A responsible theologian

would admit that there is a difference between appropriative similarity and outright

syncretism. It is helpful to note that the primary explicit justification for apophatic

theology for Dionysius comes from his understanding of Scripture. He does not quote

Plotinus or Proclus as justification, nor does he resort to bare philosophical theology

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[53] R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Bristol Classics Press, 1995), 11.

[54] Plotinus, *The Enneads* 5.3.14, trans. Stephen McKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992).

[55] Plotinus, *The Enneads* 5.5.10.

[56] Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 160-161.

outside of a Scriptural and liturgical context.[57] Parallels do not necessarily imply an alien

co-opting of Christian imagery, and Dionysius offers no positive evidence that the

Scriptural basis is being ultimately trumped by outside sources in order to justify his

theological method.[58] [59]

<div align="center">Formal Restatement of the Dionysian Method</div>

Before defending the Dionysian theological method, it will be of further help to

succinctly extract the fundamental nature of it. In the Dionysian theological method, there

are essentially three stages. First, there is the stage of making affirmative statements

about God. These statements are ultimately founded on revelation and tradition, yet they

are not limited to them, since revelation says that Heaven and Earth declare the glory of

God. These affirmative statements are valuable and necessary for the Christian's

approach to God. However, they serve as means to higher ends in the life of a Christian,

that ultimate end being union or communion with God Himself. In this sense, affirmative

theology operates as the first step on the ladder that approaches God.

The next step is the initial path of negation. The Christian comes to this path when

she realizes that the concepts we develop about God, while not entirely false, fail to

measure up to the reality that theological concepts try to indicate. For example, while it is

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[57] Rorem notes that Derrida specifically distanced himself from Dionysius because of Dionysius' being rooted in the biblical and liturgical context at the outset. See Paul Rorem, *The Dionysian Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 132, Kindle.

[58] See Isa. 55:8 and Rom. 10:33-36.

[59] This is not to say that there are no potentially problematic elements of Neoplatonic influence that have affected Dionysius' thought in certain areas. In particular, Dionysius' doctrine of creation yields certain problematic tensions between his desire for Christian theism and his Neoplatonic leanings. As Turner has pointed out, there is a fundamental aporia between Dionysius' desire to measure creation through the emanated "chain of being" of Platonic metaphysics and through the biblical idea that God directly creates all creatures.

right and true to say that God is good or holy, it is mistaken to assume that God's goodness or holiness is close to how humans conceive goodness or holiness, since, as stated earlier, revelation declares that He is unsearchable and inscrutable. Thus, the second phase of the Dionysian method is to deny the affirmations made about God, not because they are not useful, but because they ultimately cannot do complete justice to the grandeur of the reality of God. A corollary to this second move is that negative statements about God tend to be more accurate than positive descriptions about God's nature. Thus, to say that God is invisible or infinite is slightly more accurate (and thus slightly more appropriate) than to say that God is good or just. That God is not visible entails a more open-ended and incomplete description about God's nature than to call God just. To use a Platonic example, the word "justice" conjures a myriad of images in the human mind, like a court judge, a police officer, or perhaps more abstract definitions, but never really the pure essence of justice. In contrast, being invisible is simply the statement of lacking the property of visibility. This statement thus does not further assume the nature of this lack of visibility. However, this does not finally complete the Dionysian method. As stated earlier, most (if not all) of these negative statements can be restated in a positive light; "infinite" could be coherently restated as "perfect" in an Anselmian sense, for example.

Dionysius was likely aware of this particular conundrum concerning negative theology, and this is why he goes even further than negating the affirmations in his final "third way." This third way, which consists of a deferral of both affirmation and negation, is a move that is neither linguistic nor conceptual. In this phase, there is a final transcendence of all discourse in favor of a non-conceptual relational direction towards

God. The word that is most often used by Dionysius to describe this third action is that of "praise." As has been stated earlier, the ultimate goal of the Dionysian method is not elucidated in coherent detail, but I believe that his frequent usage of "praise" as the placeholder for the upward movement towards God is telling. There appears to be a fundamental appreciative characteristic to what Dionysius is trying to get at with the name of praise. The third way for the Dionysian method implies a worshipper-Worshiped relationship that is released from the affirmation-negation or linguistic-conceptual confines that initiate the theological pursuit of God.

There is also an epistemological element that precedes this doxological movement towards God, though of a more phenomenological variety rather than that of bare conceptuality. The doxological part of the third way is initiated when all effort to posit and then deny attributes about God prove to be ill-equipped to penetrate and grasp God in his essence. This conceptual failure then provides fuel for wonder and awe, as well as an impetus to approach or relate to God directly (as much as one can) while leaving behind conceptual deliberation about Him.

An important implication of the third way's ambiguity is that there is room for interpretation as to what this relation to God may be; some mystical traditions may heartily posit that there is a union of sorts, while other traditions might be hesitant to make statements that appear to imply the elimination of identity in the final relational phase. For instance, some evangelical Protestant thinkers find the vocabulary of union to be problematic terminology that takes away from the strict difference between creature

and Creator.[60] Of course, Dionysius verifies none of these individual schemes explicitly. Indeed, he would likely argue that putting words to the nature of the third way is to ultimately serve as a meager placeholder for the actual reality. Therefore, the openness of possibilities for describing the third way appears to permit a wide variety of competing Scripture- and tradition-based pictures.

<div align="center">Ethical Reasons for the Dionysian Method</div>

In contrast to the boundaries set by the Dionysian method, much of modern thought, thanks in part to the post-medieval ascent of reason as the highest authority, views thinking about God through the hermeneutics of what will be arbitrarily termed "metaphysical modernism." This is the view that our ideas and concepts about God's attributes do a good job (some even a perfect job) of getting at the fundamental nature of God. Thus, William Alston describes the general confidence of Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion to determine the fundamental nature and character of God to an exceedingly significant degree. "No one thinks we can attain a *comprehensive* knowledge of God's nature and doings. But on many crucial points, there seems to be a widespread confidence in our ability to determine exactly how things are with God."[61] The summative description that describes the mood or disposition of metaphysical modernism is "intellectual confidence." On this view, our idea of God formed through Scripture and tradition can potentially be reliable enough that humans can achieve an (mostly) accurate

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[60] For a popular evangelical discussion of interpreting Jonathan Edwards' quasi-annihilationist language in these terms, see Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 40-42, Kindle.

[61] William P. Alston, "Two Cheers for Mystery," in *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99, quoted in William J. Wainwright, "Theology and Mystery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80.

picture of the person and nature of God. If we use our reasoning faculties properly, we can develop a system of thinking that is both accurate and predictable concerning who God might be and what God may value.

On the face of it, this seems to be a reasonable position to hold. Christianity is fundamentally a revelational religion. God chose to reveal Himself through creation, the scriptures, tradition, and ultimately through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, giving us a glimpse into his character and love. The Bible, along with passages proclaiming God's mystery, encourages the pursuit of knowledge: "The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly" (Prov. 15:14). There seems to be ample reason, then, to assume that human concepts about God developed through these revelational means ought to be highly reliable and worthy of confidence.

However, the fundamental ethical danger that comes with this confidence is the potential for the perennial sin of idolatry. Idolatry, of course, is a sin that not only involves physical objects, but also objects of emotional or conceptual varieties. One fundamental example of the sin of conceptual idolatry found in the Gospels is that of the learned Pharisees. Jesus castigates the Pharisees' idolatry in John 5:39-40, declaring, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." The insight that Jesus brings in this reprimand should serve as a caution to any who are confident that their view of God is at least mostly accurate. The Pharisees used their rational faculties to derive from the Bible a system of theology that nonetheless completely ran counter to the nature of the true God revealed in Christ. Paul, discussing the eventual salvation of Israel, exclaims in Romans 11, "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (11:33-34) There appears to be implied in these verses a disposition of wariness in the concepts that are developed about God and his ways. Man is prone to idolatry of the mind, and some of these idols may be more near and dear to the mind than one may think.

Again, this is not to say that the Dionysian method desires for an individual to turn off her reasoning abilities completely or ignore revelation. However, it is proper to take the ideas conjured from the affirmative first stage of the Dionysian method with a grain of salt as well as with thanksgiving while moving onto the stage of negation. God is "unsearchable" and "inscrutable" and is conceptually "higher than our thoughts"; the most appropriate direction one should take toward thinking about God is a path of intellectually mature acceptance of ignorance.

<center>Metaphysical Modernism and Onto-theology</center>

A related issue that is of more philosophical importance is the contemporary critique of metaphysics as onto-theology, which can roughly be described as confusing the property of being with the primary *causa sui* in metaphysical thought. This technical terminology of "onto-theology" as the fundamental foundation and error of metaphysics does not necessarily have the God of Christianity in view, for Martin Heidegger, who first developed the contemporary meaning of onto-theology, identified any cause or principle of reality developed by metaphysicians as fair game when it comes to his critique of metaphysics.[62] The fundamental flaw that Heidegger determined with all

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[62] It is helpful to see this in Heidegger's essay "The Onto-theo-logical Nature of Metaphysics" is primarily developed in analysis of Hegel's philosophy of Spirit. See Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-

metaphysical systems (including those of metaphysical theism's "God of the philosophers") is that the distinction between the nature of Being and the Cause that brings about the Being of beings has been greatly confused. Heidegger puts the confusion this way:

> If metaphysics thinks Existence with an eye toward its basis which is common to every individual Existent as such, then metaphysics is logic in the form of onto-logic. If metaphysics thinks Existence as such in terms of the Whole, that is, with an eye toward the highest all-understanding Existence, then metaphysics becomes logic in the form of theo-logic. Because metaphysical thinking remains imbedded in difference which as such is not the object of thought, metaphysics is at one and the same time uniquely ontology and theology by virtue of the unifying oneness of the issue.[63]

For Heidegger, ontology attempts to do justice to two distinct poles simultaneously by accounting for the nature of Being or Existence and for the nature of the Primal Being or Existent. Marion describes the task of the onto-logic end of determining what Being is by stating "…insofar as it is a negation of entity, it is able to ground each and every entity, including that named 'God,' because it makes them both thinkable (according to entity, indeed to a concept of entity) and possible (conceivable as noncontradictory in a concept)."[64] However, the theo-logical pole of classical ontology puts the foundation of all beings on some primordial being as a source of being for all that exists. This primal entity "…not only grounds the other beings in the name of the first cause that gives an

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logical Nature of Metaphysics," in *Essays in Metaphysics: Identity and Difference* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1960), loc. 331-677, Kindle.

[63] Ibid., loc. 634-644, Kindle.

[64] Jean-Luc Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being: Horse-Texte*, 2nd ed., trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 202-203, Kindle.

account as well but also grounds the being of an entity by bringing it to perfection and even by bringing into existence the formal characteristics of entitativeness."[65]

There are apparently two possible horns of a dilemma that comes from onto-theological metaphysics concerning God. The first horn states that God must be the conceptual principle of Being that all beings possess. This option is hardly acceptable to a classical Christian theist, for a conceptual principle is incapable of any personal or causal processes whatsoever. God as the Being that all beings possess fails to adequately conform to the fundamental picture of God developed within revelation. God, according to the Christian tradition, is not merely a fundamental property that all beings possess, but rather a distinct person inherently independent of creation (though not divorced from it). In contrast, the other horn has a much greater appeal to the Christian tradition. It states that God possesses the property of being in the same way that a human or a rock possesses being. God exists in just the same way that the created order exists. Of course, there would be a distinction between God as Creator and every other object as created; nevertheless, God and created things equally are and exist. Though God necessarily exists in contrast to the contingent existence of creatures, God and all currently existing contingent creatures possess the same fundamental property of being. For many theologians, this is a perfectly acceptable option for theology proper.[66] After all, would not a God without being therefore not exist at all?

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[65] Jean-Luc Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-lology," 203.

[66] Marion notes that, though Aquinas is credited with defining metaphysics in an ontotheological way (though not putting it into practice), it was really Duns Scotus and Francisco Suarez who first implemented a science that enscribed God necessarily within the horizon of common being. Of course, Kant and Hegel were later modern examples of those who required God to be within the bounds of reason alone in order to be meaningful. See Jean-Luc Marion, "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: a Relief for Theology," trans. Thomas A. Carlson, in *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 50-51, and Jean-Luc Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-Theology," 209.

A closer look at this position, however, yields questions that, for many, are unforeseen. What is the ultimate principle behind all things in a worldview where God falls under the category of being? Most theologians would still posit God as the obvious answer, but is this really the case? On this worldview, God is just as dependent on possessing being in the same way that created beings possess being. Again, even though God is uncreated eternity, on this view he nevertheless has his being established wholly within the horizon of the property of Being. This implies that Being is the ultimate foundation for everything that exists, including God. If all things must exist within the philosophical horizon of Being in order to be meaningfully existent, then to say that God might be outside of Being would be to say that there is no God. In this sense, it would be technically a mistake to say that God is the principle of all, since God depends upon the property of being just as humans and rocks depend on it. Being, therefore, may be correctly referred to as the foundation of reality, and God would, at best, be the first participant in the property of being. God, therefore, does not create *ex nihilo* in a strict sense, since God imparts or imputes being, the very fundamental property of Him, onto the created order, rather than radically creating out of nothing. Therefore, on this onto-theological view of reality, there is an endless confusion as to whether God or Being is truly the ultimate reality.

<center>Dionysian method and onto-theology</center>

However, the horns of the dilemma may be split through the Dionysian methodology. According to the method imparted by Dionysius, it is not necessary that God must be posited as the property of Being shared by existent objects, nor is it necessary to say that God possesses being like creatures do. In order to have an adequate

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third option for this dilemma, it will be necessary to posit God as beyond Being itself.

Dionysius makes reference to God as beyond the category of Being in multiple instances,

both in the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology*. In the Dionysian view of God, "It

[God] is and is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself

transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is,"

and that "…that Cause is superior to being and nonbeings. The name 'Being' extends to

all beings which are, and it is beyond them. The name 'Life" extends to all living things,

and yet is beyond them. The name 'Wisdom' reaches out to everything which has to do

with understanding, reason, and sense perception, and surpasses them all."[67] [68]

A brief discussion of the Dionysian view of "Being" as a name for God used to

praise him is necessary to further grasp Dionysius' view of the relationship between God

and being. Dionysius' basic ontology in the *Divine Names* is repeated as follows:

> Being precedes the entities which participate in it. Being in itself is more revered
> than the being of Life itself and Wisdom itself and Likeness to divinity itself.
> Whatever beings participate in these things must, before all else, participate in
> Being…Consider anything which is. Its being and eternity is Being itself. So
> therefore God as originator of everything through the first of all his gifts is praised
> as "He who is." In a surpassing fashion he possesses preexistence and
> preeminence and he originated being, I mean absolute being, and with that as
> instrument he founded every type of existent…The first gift therefore of the
> absolutely transcendent Goodness is the gift of being, and that Goodness is
> praised from those that first and principally have a share of being. From it and in
> it are Being itself, the source of beings, all beings and whatever else has a portion
> of existence.[69]

Again, for Dionysius, God is most properly referred to in relation to all things as Cause.

God is not only the Cause and Source of the material and spiritual universe, but also of

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[67] Dionysius, *The Divine Names,* in *The Complete Works*, 50.

[68] Ibid.*,* 96.

[69] Ibid., 99.

properties themselves, no matter how fundamental they are. Being, non-being, unity, multiplicity, light, darkness, truth, falsehood, life, goodness, and wisdom (among many other basic qualities) are view as creations of the primal and foundational Cause that preexists all of them. Of course, Dionysius intends to use "Cause" as merely a placeholder; if "Cause" were to be considered a metaphysically accurate name, the problem Dionysius would run into is that of explaining how God could be the Cause of causality. However, the fundamental insight that Dionysius is trying to get at concerning God is that he is the fundamental generator of all conceivable properties man can reflect on, from the most complex to the most basic, which includes Being.

Thus, with this radical scheme of systematizing God's relationship to creation, Dionysius appears to render the dilemma furnished by the recent critique of onto-theology impotent. God is neither equated with the property of Being, nor is He essentially confined to possessing the property of being like that of created beings. It also follows that God-talk is indeed possible independent of the debate on whether metaphysics is a legitimate form of discourse for philosophy and theology. The Dionysian view of God and being therefore has great philosophical advantages going forward in the postmodern milieu that has reared its head for over a half-decade.

Or does it? Crucial objections can be and have been raised against the idea of a God who is not in possession of the property of being or existence. Does not this position give way to the conclusion that God does not exist, that there is no God? Taliaferro and Meister seem to think so: "To contend that God is outside 'the order of being' makes sense if the claim is that God is not a created being. If the claim is that God is beyond or outside being (or existence), however, it seems that this is to claim that there is no

God...[T]o claim that something is no-thing seems very close to claiming that something is nothing."[70] Responding to Herbert McCabe's claim that God is incomprehensible precisely because he is the Creator of all things, Taliaferro and Meister reply, "We suggest that McCabe's language cannot itself be literal…[I]f God is truly completely incomprehensible, then it seems that we cannot comprehend that God 'is Creator of all that is.'"[71] If Taliaferro and Meister are right on this, then it seems that a radical form of atheism would follow from complete incomprehensibility.

Indeed, the logical problem may be intensified by how Dionysius would likely amend the objection that to be no-thing appears to simply be nothing, for Dionysius praises God as wholly preexisting the dichotomy of being and nonbeing altogether. The very foundations of conceptually predicating properties of God are to ultimately be abandoned at the end of the Dionysian method, whether it is God as a being or God as nothing.[72] It is apparent that consistency in the Dionysian apophatic method renders moot the possibility of giving a clear response that may be adequately visualized by any human mind. It would be like how Augustine defended God's eternity ontologically prior to time in Book XI of the *Confessions* by stating that "You [God] made all time and before all times you are, and there was never a time when there was no time."[73] The most appropriate way to respond to this objection is to say that there must be some possible

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[70] Taliaferro and Meister, *Contemporary Philosophical Theology,* loc. 984-994.

[71] Ibid., loc. 993.

[72] Note that the Dionysian method has thus far been presented in a temporal sequence of first, second, and third. However, it may not necessarily be linear in practice. For example, by my lights there is no apparent contradiction in the possibility that all moments happening simultaneously in one phenomenological experience.

[73] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert C. Outler and Mark Vessey (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2007), 193.

distinction between the statements "God does not possess being" and "There is no God," or, conversely, to say "God does not exist" can still imply "There is a God." On some level, technicality is demanded of the crucial predicates used in these statements. "To possess being/to be" and "to exist" are here viewed as infinitives that essentially have the same meaning. Thus, to say that God exists in the sense that God possesses the attribute of being like the created world and the possible world within the human conceptual milieu is false. To say that God possesses the property of being like a human, a cat, or a bicycle possesses being is false, and therefore God does not exist in the way that these things do. This still begs the question: in exactly what way can we say that there is a God? The only answer that the practitioner of the Dionysian method can give is "God is not in any way that any finite creature can be or conceive." Like the aporia of God's eternity, no effort of language can fully comprehend the nature of God's transcendence over being and non-being. Our most accurate ideas about God derived through the condescension of revelation ultimately yield to paradoxes that mark the limits of language itself in doing God justice. As will be shown later, Thomas Aquinas was crucial in delineating the difference between God's "being" and created being.

Though the enterprise of kataphatic theology is absolutely necessary for the journey of relationship with the Divine, this rational discomfort that one feels at the seeming absurdity of describing God properly through this linguistic enterprise is ultimately the sign that one must finally relinquish the positive way of referring to God. One must become embarrassed at the profusion of conceptual efforts to "think God," and, as Turner remarks concerning this awkwardness, "…[T]hat embarrassment has to be procured, and to reach that point—this is the essence of the cataphatic—it is necessary to

talk too much."[74] One must praise God by every name under heaven as Cause of all, and then grow silent through the sheer inadequacy of this process. This useful failure, where the limits of language are discovered, is what sends the believer into the negation and subsequent transcendence of the affirmation/negation polarity into the realm of worship.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the Dionysian method of situating theology thus described begins with what most Western theologians would conventionally call "theology." The Christian is to use her rational faculties (with the aid and permission of authoritative revelation) to look at the world around her, the world within her own consciousness, and the deposits of special revelation in order to ascribe appropriate attributes to the Cause of all things. This is the necessary first step in the Christian's relating to God, but it is not to be considered the end. From this properly followed enterprise of theological affirmation, a realization occurs of the vastness and greatness of God that is unable to be captured through human conceptual and linguistic conventions. This leads the theologian to negate all of the attributes ascribed to God from kataphatic theology as inadequate and improper models for reflecting how God truly is in himself. This is not to say that they are misleading or deceiving; indeed, one comes upon the fact of the utterly transcendent nature of the Godhead through the process of affirmative theology, primarily through special revelation. Thus, the movement from positive to negative is the deliverance of doing theology properly. Yet to simply negate an affirmation is not enough to transcend conceptual discourse about God. The old adage for apophatic theology that negative statements are more appropriate than positive statements is true, but again this is not the

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[74] Turner, "The Darkness of God," 23.

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final end of the Dionysian method. The final end of the Dionysian method is to break away with linguistic and conceptual discourse concerning God in order to seek a simultaneously primal and advanced direct relationship with God Himself. This direct relationship with God has an aesthetic element wherein the Christian enacts a gaze of praise and wonder. This aesthetic element includes an epistemological element, since one of the sources of aesthetic response to God in this third step is the ultimate "cloud of unknowing" in which the utterly transcendent and utterly immanent God resides.

This Dionysian method for situating affirmative theology within the grander scheme of a Divine-human relationship has both theological and philosophical elements that are ultimately bound up with each other. Idolatry is fundamentally avoided in the Dionysian method, since no concepts concerning God and his attributes are given an absolute and certain authority. The statements from special revelation, along with the deliverances of general revelation authorized by special revelation, are not rendered unnecessary, but are qualified particularly from special revelation that God's nature is beyond what man can make of these deliverances. God's goodness and power are real, but the human effort to conceptualize what it means that God is good and omnipotent are immeasurably inadequate to show God's nature in its infinite fullness. From a philosophical point of view, the Dionysian method is likewise successful in avoiding the problematic dilemma of onto-theology in such a way that God is beyond being, rendering Him outside of the trappings of modern metaphysics.

An objection might be raised as to whether this Dionysian method could be applicable to any theologian who is outside of the realm of postmodern theology or phenomenology of religion. It is my intent that the preceding exposition of Dionysius'

methodology gives good reason to think that there is a potentially universal viability to incorporating Dionysius' view of theology into theological work today. However, this argument for the usefulness of the Dionysian view of theology is not restricted to abstract argumentation. There have been numerous theologians throughout the history of the Church who have held a high regard for doing affirmative theology, yet simultaneously incorporated an approval of the Dionysian methodology. Time and space will not permit an investigation of every theologian who was influenced by Dionysius in this manner, but, for the sake of brevity, two theologians will be discussed below who are both influential and dissimilar in many ways, yet incorporated the Dionysian methodology in their own distinct framework. The first theologian I will discuss is Thomas Aquinas, that titan in the history of metaphysics and natural theology. The second I will discuss is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, much like Dionysius, perceived a triadic notion of experience of God as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. The purpose of discussing the Dionysian influence on these authors is to cast a wide and concrete net concerning how applicable Dionysius is to efforts of theological work. Dionysius will be shown to be for the formulators of great theological systems, and not merely for the silent mystics.

Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius

For those with only a cursory knowledge of Thomas Aquinas, it might come as a surprise that this prominent theologian might be relevant to a discussion of the Dionysian method. After all, Aquinas is a monolith within the history of natural theology, a discipline that is considered a grave sin to many who are prone to be critical of onto-theology. Indeed, it would seem that Aquinas' Aristotelian insistence that *theologia* is a

scientia might cast significant doubt as to whether Dionysius had any relevant effect upon Aquinas' thinking.[75]

And yet, it is often said that Dionysius is the most quoted extrabiblical source in Aquinas' entire corpus besides Aristotle.[76] Though this appears to be the case, lengthy discussion on the degree in which Dionysius influenced Aquinas has been a relatively recent emergence.[77] Much of this discussion has been situated within the relatively recent study of the Neoplatonic influence upon Aquinas; after all, his reception of Aristotle was very much by way of the translations of medieval Islamic Platonists. It will be useful to examine the impact of Dionysius' meta-theological method on Aquinas by first examining his commentary on the *Divine Names*, particularly the sections that discuss the epistemological methods developed within the *Divine Names*, namely the *Prœmium* and Chapter 1, Lectio 1. Afterwards, a defense will be presented concerning Aquinas' faithfulness to the meta-theological methodology spelled out in the Dionysian corpus, particularly in response to the claims of John D. Jones that Aquinas practiced unfaithfulness to Dionysian thought through his efforts toward a theological *scientia*.[78] I

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[75] "…[S]acred doctrine is a science because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed. Hence, just as the musician accepts on authority the principles taught him by the mathematician, so sacred science is established on principles revealed by God." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.2. All quotes from the *Summa Theologiæ*, both Latin and English, are from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ, Latin-English Edition, Volume I: Prima Pars, Q. 1-64* (Scotts Valley, CA: Nova Antiqua CreateSpace, 2008).

[76] This is, at least, according to the back cover of Fran O'Rourke's 2005 reprint of his book *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*. See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

[77] Also on the back cover of O'Rourke's 2005 reprint of *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, the tome is advertised to have been "…the only available work that investigates the pervasive influence of Dionysius on Aquinas, while at the same time examining the latter's profound originality." Though the veracity of this claim is not the subject of this paper, it shows the relative newness of this particular theological comparison.

[78] John D. Jones, "(Mis?)-Reading the Divine Names as a Science: Aquinas' Interpretation of the Divine Names of (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 2

will then briefly situate Dionysius' influence upon significant points in Aquinas'

theology, particularly within the *Summa Theologiæ*.

<div align="center">Aquinas' Commentary on the *Divine Names*</div>

Aquinas' *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* is particularly

significant because of how much Aquinas is able to find concordance with Dionysius'

thought on the knowledge of God, while at the same time is able to put forth his own

originality concerning the ideas posited within the *Divine Names*. To begin with, In

Chapter 1, Lectio 1, Aquinas grapples with the question of why it is that God is not

entirely comprehensible to the human mind. The answer Thomas gives is that, in fact,

God is infinitely knowable, but can only be comprehended fully by an infinite mind.[79]

God has constructed the human mind only to be able to comprehend him in a finite sense

through reason and the senses. Aquinas formulates this neatly when he says, "Et ideo

sicut essential divina est supersubstantialis, [Dionysius] ita et [eius] *scientiam*

supersubstantialem dixit. Semper enim oportet obiectum cognitivae virtutis, virtuti

cognoscenti proportionatum esse."[80] In order for something to be fully comprehended,

there must be a concord between the fullness of the thing known and the ability of the

knower to fully cognize it. There is no fully comprehending God by humans, though this

is not through any defect in God; rather there is a God-designed limitation to the human

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(2008): 143-172, accessed November 29, 2016,
http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f82f1ea1-4a7a-49f5-a7be-
b834d1af4a12%40sessionmgr120&vid=13&hid=118.

[79] O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas,* 23.

[80] Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* 1.1.14. All quotes
from *De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* are from Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis
Nominibus Expositio*, ed. Celesai Pera (Rome, IT: Marietti, 1950).

capacity to know his essence. Thus, a "knowledge of the super-substantial" is inherently possible, but it can only be partial for humanity's finite reasoning capacities.

However, like Dionysius, Aquinas does not think this means theological talk is fruitless. God has communicated a portion of knowledge concerning himself through Scripture and tradition, but also through the sensible world and the measure of participation in God's nature given to human beings.[81] Aquinas even goes so far as to say that the goodness of the divine nature necessitates that he reveal some of himself: "It would indeed be against the nature of divine goodness that God should retain for himself all his knowledge and not communicate it to anyone else in any way whatsoever, since it belongs to the nature of the good that that it should communicate itself to others."[82] For Aquinas, participation, as opposed to mere abstraction, involves a mystical contemplation of God such that one conforms to the ideal image of God more fully.[83]

Aquinas is in agreement with Dionysius in Chapter 1, Lectio 1, Paragraph 6-8 that the fundamental source for the names of God must be found in the special revelation of the Bible. As O'Rourke puts it, Aquinas views Dionysius' *Divine Names* as functioning "…by not relying on human reason, but by drawing strength and security from the authority of Scripture."[84] However, this does not contradict the proposition that some fundamental names for God, such as Being and Goodness, are discoverable through metaphysical reflection based on sense perception. Indeed, because revelation reveals

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[81] Aquinas, *De Divinus Nominibus Expositio* 1.1.1, 2, and 9; O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 25.

[82] Aquinas, *De Divinus Nominibus Expositio* 1.1.36; O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 25.

[83] O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 25.

[84] Ibid., 26.

names concerning God that resemble qualities found in the domain of the sensible realm, this gives reason authorization to reflect on the causal principle of all things within this realm. According to Aquinas' position, as O'Rourke delicately puts it, "Reason may respond to revelation when presented with those truths of God for which a likeness may be found in finite beings."[85] Though Dionysius only hints at the reality of Divine names derived from creation in his descriptions of the *Symbolic Theology*, it will be shown below that this principle is crucial for understanding the affirmative project Aquinas put forth in his various metaphysical efforts.

In light of this validation of affirmative theology, Aquinas qualifies the fundamental limitation of theological discourse:

> Sed quia omnis similitudo creaturae ad Deum deficiens est et hoc ipsum quod Deus est omne id quod in creaturis invenitur excedit, quicquid in creaturis a nobis cognoscitur a Deo removetur, secundum quod in creaturis est; ut sic, post omne illud quod intellectus noster ex creaturis manuductus de Deo concipere potest, hoc ipsum quod Deus est remaneat occultum et ignotum.[86]

Here, the crucial principle is that, no matter how valid our theological categories are or how in line with Scripture and tradition they may be, God vastly exceeds the potential human measure of these categories. Humanity's most well-rounded and comprehensive idea of God as the Good nonetheless falls immeasurably short of grasping the totality of what it might mean for God to be the Good. Speaking of even the most fundamental ideas described in the *Divine Names*, such as "life" or "essence," Aquinas says, "Non solum enim Deus non est lapis aut sol, qualia sensu apprehenduntur, sed nec est talis vita aut essentia qualis ab intellectu nostro concipi potest et sic hoc ipsum quod Deus est, cum

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[85] O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 28.

[86] Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* Proemium 1.

excedat omne illud quod a nobis apprehenditur, nobis remanet ignotum."[87] Aquinas

thinks that concepts like life or essence as properties of God, though appropriate as far as

they go, nonetheless fail to encompass all that these can possibly mean in relation to God

compared to creaturely life or essence. Thus, Aquinas agrees with Dionysius that

affirmative theology, though necessary, is not completely fulfilled. It can be seen that the

degree of Aquinas' agreement with Dionysius' fundamental insight is profound, but it

will be helpful to show how Dionysius has impacted Aquinas' own theological efforts, as

well as how Aquinas has appropriated the Dionysian method with his own distinct

emphases.

<center>Dionysian Influence upon Thomistic Thought: the Triplex Via</center>

A major touchstone in Dionysian influence upon the thought of Thomas Aquinas

is in his *triplex via*,[88] or three ways, of achieving knowledge of God. O'Rourke notes

how, in Aquinas' commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, Aquinas speaks of the ways as

per causalitatem, per remotionem, and *per eminentiam.*[89] *Per causalitatem* refers to

giving affirmative statements about God concerning more intelligible qualities (Being,

Life, etc.) in reference to God as Cause of all of these intelligible qualities. The *via*

remotionem refers to the negation of all sensible creatures insofar as they fail to be God.

Finally, the *via eminentiam* refers to how God transcends human concepts altogether.

One can find in Aquinas' commentary on the *Divine Names* a sign of the Dionysian

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[87] Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* Proemium 1.

[88] This *triplex via* should be distinguished from the traditional mystical *triplex via*, which is that of purgation, illumination, and union.

[89] Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. P. Mandonnet (Paris, FR: Lethielleux, 1929), 88, quoted in O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 35; O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 31.

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influence concerning the *triplex via*.[90] The fundamental source of this *triplex via* seems to be from the *Divine Names*, where Dionysius describes the approach to God as passing "…by way of the *denial* and *transcendence* of all things and by way of the *cause* of all things."[91] For Aquinas, the terms "denial" and "transcendence" both indicate the individual movements of the *via remotionem* and the *via eminentiam*, respectively, though this unique interpretation may be making two movements where there is merely one implied in the original text.

It could be argued that the process of the *triplex via* is a total reversal of the Dionysian formulation in Book 7 of the *Divine Names*; Etienne Gilson has made such an argument.[92] However, there is no contradiction between Aquinas' apparent order of operations and that of the *Divine Names* Book 7. For one thing, it is not necessary to assume that, in this particular passage, Dionysius' order of denial, transcendence, and cause are meant to be followed linearly. Indeed, the main thrust of Dionysius' method found throughout his corpus is more in line with how Aquinas organized his plan. O'Rourke notes, "…[I]n contrasting, for example, human cognition with the transcendence of God's nature, [Aquinas] may give primary significance to negation and eminence; in the order of discovery, however causality is given priority, since it is immediately accessible."[93] Neither Dionysius nor Aquinas are implying a strict itinerary

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[90] O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 32-34.

[91] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, 108, emphasis mine.

[92] Gilson essentially reads Aquinas as viewing God's super-essentiality as merely implying God as being pure and simple, in contrast to God as beyond being in Dionysius. See Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. K. Shook, C. S. B. (New York, NY: Random House, 1959), loc. 3139-3202, Kindle.

[93] O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 36.

in these models, and, therefore, the conclusion of contradiction does not necessarily follow.

<p style="text-align:center">Dionysian Influence upon Thomistic Thought: the Summa Theologiæ</p>

This *triplex via* of Aquinas' system, and thus the crucial Dionysian influence upon Aquinas' thought, fundamentally is at play within his great theological effort the *Summa Theologiæ*. This comes out particularly in Book I, Q. 12 and 13. In Q. 12, Article 12, Aquinas addresses the fundamental question contained within the *Divine Names*: Given that we only perceive and conceive of finite reality through our senses and through reason, how then can we come to know that which is beyond limit, time, and space? Aquinas asserts, like Dionysius, that we fundamentally cannot see God in his essence, since no created effect can be equal in conceptual content to the First Cause: "Ex sensibilibus autem non potest usque ad hoc intellectus noster pertingere, quod divinam essentiam videat, quia creaturae sensibiles sunt effectus Dei virtutem causae non adaequantes."[94] One can use neither reason nor the senses to fully cognize the depth of the power of God, since He is beyond all: "Unde ex sensibilium cognitione non potest tota Dei virtus cognosci, et per consequens nec eius essentia videri."[95] However, Aquinas is conscious in Article 12 about how we can know some aspects about God as First Cause through his creatures, all while preserving the conceptual chasm between finite creation and the infinite Godhead simultaneously: "Unde cognoscimus de ipso habitudinem ipsius ad creaturas, quod silicet omnium est causa; et differentiam creaturarum ab ipso, quod scilicet ipse non est aliquid eorum quae ab eo causantur; et quod haec non removentur ab

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[94] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.12.12.

[95] Ibid.

eo propter eius defectum, sed quia superexcedit."[96] For Aquinas, natural knowledge of

God is extrapolated by reasoning from objects of sense perception to the one who is the

fundamental cause of all things; yet this does not negate the fact that God superexceeds

all concepts developed through such efforts. Ultimately, Aquinas says that we cannot

know God in his ineffable essence, yet, like Dionysius, we can come to an understanding

of God in relationship to his creation as its Cause.[97]

Question 13 is more explicitly indebted to Dionysius' *Divine Names*, for it is there

that Aquinas discusses the names of God. Because all of the perfections preexist within

the simplicity of God, he may therefore be named by all of the perfections that created

beings finitely possess, in accordance with the Aristotelian notion that every cause is at

least partially reflected in its effects. Aquinas describes this relationship by saying "Quae

quidem perfectiones in Deo praeexistunt unite et simpliciter: in creaturis vero recipiuntur

divise et multipliciter."[98] He even goes on to say that these perfections exist within God

essentially, albeit more eminently (with the adjective *eminentius* being a reference to the

via eminentiam).[99] However, Aquinas posits that the proper manner of naming God

through these perfections delivers the result that his essence has not been fully grasped.

Like Dionysius, this circumstance of perpetual ignorance concerning the

knowledge of God's essence fails to imply that statements about God are valueless. A

helpful way that Aquinas presents this is through his argument that the name of God is

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[96] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.12.12.

[97] In *Summa Theologiæ* 1.12.13, Aquinas does go on to establish that grace is a means of acquiring knowledge of God that goes beyond natural reason.

[98] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.13.4.

[99] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.13.6.

neither completely univocally predicated nor completely equivocal. For Aquinas, the reason that the name of God can be neither univocal nor equivocal is that both positions imply that God cannot be the Cause of all creation. Though Aquinas does concede that an equivocal term must be reduced to the univocal essence of the term, he argues that a non-univocal source precedes any univocal designation of species. This is so, says Aquinas, because a univocal agent (i.e. a creature that can be listed under a species) cannot cause its own species, but can only participate in the meaning of the species it reflects. Thus, a dog cannot cause of the species "dog," but can merely participate in it. However, at the other extreme, to say that names cannot be ascribed to God except by a completely equivocal sense (the highest of high negative theology) is also inappropriate. If all names ascribed to God are true in a completely equivocal sense, then it ultimately implies that there is no relationship between the created order and God, and that nothing whatsoever can be thought or known concerning God. For Aquinas, as well as for Dionysius, this concession goes against the testimony of both the philosophers and the Scriptures concerning God as Cause, and renders all statements about God as invalid.[100]

For Aquinas, what is ultimately left in splitting the horns of the univocal-equivocal dilemma is that of the principle of analogy. For Aquinas, the names of God derived from creation possess a likeness that reflect God only partially: "Unde quaelibet creatura intantum eum repraesentat, et est ei similis, inquantum perfectionem aliquam habet, non tamen ita quod repraesentat eum sicut aliquid eiusdem speciei vel generis, sed sicut excellens principium, a cuius forma effectus deficiunt, cuius tamen aliqualem

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[100] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.13.5.

similitudinem effectus consequuntur…"[101] Though the various perfections perceived in

creatures point to the perfections inherent in the divine nature, they necessarily fall short

of equaling the essence of the divine nature. For Aquinas, this is shown from the fact that

man must conceive of the qualities of God, such as "goodness" and "wisdom,"

separately, though in reality there must be no composition in God: "Deus autem, in se

consideratus, est omnino unus et simplex, sed tamen intellectus noster secundum diversas

conceptiones ipsum cognoscit, eo quod non potest ipsum ut in seipso est, videre."[102]

From these considerations, it is apparent that Aquinas' approach to theological

epistemology is remarkably close to the *Divine Names*. For Aquinas as well as Dionysius,

we are unable to know God as He is in Himself, yet some measure of Him can be

understood through his causal agency towards creation. Neither effort attempts to reduce

the mystery of God to a platitude, but both see theology as falling short to a significant

degree such that God does not serve as a fully definable and fully comprehensible species

subject to a thorough metaphysical science. Aquinas is not interested in creating an onto-

theological "science of God" which would reduce Him to a cog in a metaphysical

machine. With all of Aquinas' thoroughness in the *Summa Theologiæ*, he was careful to

defer much speculation as to what is the divine essence.

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[101] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.13.2.

[102] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.13.12.

Contrasting Dionysius and Aquinas

Of course, we ought not overstep the ground that is gained in the preceding analysis. To say that Thomas Aquinas is an inheritor of the Dionysian method is far from implying that he is a replicator of Dionysius. Indeed, there are crucial distinctions between Dionysius and Aquinas that must be kept in mind so as not to distort our image of Aquinas as following the Dionysian method. The differences in time, culture, and intellectual milieu virtually guarantee that Aquinas will not read Dionysius in precisely the way Dionysius intended to be read. Certain significant differences between what Dionysius likely thought and how Aquinas interpreted him ought to be taken into account before coming to a full conclusion of Aquinas' use of the Dionysian method.

John D. Jones provides a useful critique of Aquinas' reading of the *Divine Names* from the vantage point of the development of Eastern Orthodoxy. The first major critique that Jones levels at Aquinas' reading (and likely the entire western Medieval appropriation of Dionysius) is the fundamental lack of effort in situating Dionysius within the liturgical and ecclesial context of his time. In much of western Medieval Dionysianism, with Aquinas included, texts like the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* tended to be viewed more as speaking towards personal mysticism or theological reflection and less as related to the liturgical significance it holds in the context in which it was written.[103] An important corollary derived from this phenomenon, particularly concerning Aquinas' reading, is the apparent lack of aesthetic or hymnological themes in his analysis of the *Divine Names*. Jones notes that, with both the

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[103] Examples of Western personal Dionysian mysticism include the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Hugh of Balma Nicholas of Cusa, and John of the Cross, among others. See various essays in *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, eds. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2009), Kindle.

content of the analysis made by Aquinas as well as his artificial way of dividing up the

Divine Names according to perceived linear scientific reasoning in Dionysius' train of

thought, Aquinas' view and approach to the *Divine Names* "…are exactly those that one

would expect for someone conveying a science."[104] Jones claims that this intellectual and

epistemological approach fundamentally colors the way Aquinas approaches the *Divine*

Names. Though Dionysius frequently refers to his efforts in the *Divine Names* as efforts

of praise, "…Aquinas never indicates that Dionysius is 'hymning" or 'praising' God as

one of the 'cognitive' activities in which he is engaged while composing the *Divine*

Names."[105] In fact, Jones extracts from the work of Aquinas that he tends to give

disciplines like teaching and preaching a higher rank of importance than praise and

music, which is something that Dionysius surely would feel different about.[106]

Aquinas' view of the *Divine Names* as scientific is also a significant point of

potential misreading on his part, according to Jones. He notes that, since Aquinas' idea of

a science implies the potentiality for seeing the essence of God in the next life, and since

Aquinas portrays the *Divine Names* as a science, indeed a "skillful" science,[107] it is

implied that Aquinas believes Dionysius would concur with him that the blessed see the

essence of God in the afterlife. However, this is far from obviously true, since Dionysius

appears to claim that such perception is inherently impossible for finite minds: "Indeed

the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process…Mind beyond mind,

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[104] Jones, "(Mis?)-Reading the Divine Names as a Science," 151.

[105] Jones, "(Mis?)-Reading the Divine Names as a Science," 154.

[106] Ibid., 155.

[107] Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* 1.1.1.

word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name."[108]

One could certainly point out that Aquinas' vision of the blessed does not equate to an onto-theological metaphysical grasping of the nature of the divine. Conor McDonough argues that the kind of knowledge of God in the afterlife should be a more nuanced concept that perpetually involves a kind of unknowing.[109] However, it cannot be ignored that the Eastern distinction between the inaccessible essence and accessible energies in God that is likely in play in Dionysius' theology proper stands in contrast to Aquinas' view that there is an essence in God that is capable of being known, if only finitely, in the next life.

<center>Dionysian Method in Aquinas</center>

All of these differences between Dionysius and Aquinas may be granted, and thus it may be that to call Aquinas a pure Dionysian is inaccurate.[110] However, this is not to say that the heart of the Dionysian method is not at play in Aquinas' approach to theology. Even though Aquinas filters the *Divine Names* through an Aristotelian western sieve, his carefulness when approaching positive affirmations about God and his putting them in their proper perspective regarding the reality of God's ultimate incomprehensibility remains in concert with the Dionysian method.

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[108] Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works,* 49-50.

[109] Conor McDonough, O. P., "Grounding Speech and Silence: Cataphaticism and Apophaticism in Denys and Aquinas," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2011): 75, accessed February 7, 2017, http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0021140010387977.

[110] However, there may indeed be serious inaccuracies in Jones's representation of Aquinas's idea of "science," particularly in relation to the idea of seeing God wholly in the afterlife. Does seeing God's simple essence automatically mean acquiring comprehensive knowledge of it? This does not necessarily follow. For instance, there is nothing contradictory about seeing the whole of God, yet experiencing the content and meaning of this vision as ever unfolding.

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By way of concluding this discussion on Aquinas and the Dionysian method, it will be helpful to consider what contemporary phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion has to say as of late about the fundamental difference between Aquinas' method of treating God theologically compared to his more onto-theological contemporaries and followers. A certain set of questions still remain that must be met before we leave Aquinas established as a practitioner of the Dionysian method. First, how is Aquinas (and also by implication Dionysius) able to avoid onto-theology and still speak of God as the first cause of all creation? Second, how can Aquinas also speak of God as *actus essendi* apart from a systematic onto-theology? Marion's later treatment of these issues in his essay "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy" addresses these questions by highlighting the distance that these concepts imply between God and creatures through the implementation of analogy. For Marion, Aquinas' concept of analogy when discussing the nature and essence of God is not intended to simply comfort the theologian by assuring her that her statements about God are more or less accurate. Instead, analogy, along with its kataphatic purpose, is meant to highlight the fundamental disproportionality between what knowledge can be gained about God through reason and revelation and what is the exceeding amount of reality concerning God. According to Marion, "For Aquinas, analogy…intended to emphasize that no name, no concept, no determination should be applied in the same sense to the creature and to God, especially *esse*."[111] For Marion, this thesis that the analogy, and the *analogia entis* in particular, "…has no other function than to dig the chasm that separates the two understandings of *esse* (and not to bridge it)," is ultimately

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[111] Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being*, 212, Kindle.

the crucial foundation on which to interpret God as first cause and as *actus essendi* in Aquinas.[112]

The first question dealing with causality appears to clearly evoke one of the main tenets of onto-theology, which is that there is an entity that is first cause of all other entities and also is *causa sui*. Marion does recognize statements that, at first glance, appear to put God in a metaphysical system as an efficient cause in Aquinas. Take the statement in the *Summa Theologiae* that explicitly expresses this: "Ergo est necesse ponere aliquam causam efficientem primam, quam omnes Deum nominant."[113] However, Marion argues that, contrary to Descartes' view of God as "totalis et efficiens causa," Aquinas does not limit causality exclusively to efficient cause, but also to formal and final causality, echoing the multiple Aristotelian ways of understanding causality. Not only this, but Marion also emphasizes the close relationship between Dionysius and Aquinas when it comes to causal implications of the Divine. Here it is worth reproducing the quote from Aquinas' commentary on the *Divine Names* mentioned by Marion: "Est autem Deus universalis causa omnium quae naturaliter fiunt," which Marion translates as "God is the universal cause of all things that occur naturally."[114] From this kind of statement, Marion takes the Aristotelian multivocal nature of causality in Aquinas and draws the conclusion that causality from God is not necessarily reducible to the kind of causality found within a metaphysical system. Therefore, for Aquinas, causality from

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[112] It is certainly debatable whether digging the conceptual chasm of opposing concepts of *esse* is the *only* function of the doctrine of analogy as Marion asserts. However, this chasm does seem to be the fundamental hermeneutic by which Aquinas measures positive analogical resemblances between creature and Creator, as Marion would likely argue.

[113] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* 1.2.3.

[114] Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus Expositio* 4.21.550, in Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-Theology," in *God Without Being,* 217, Kindle.

God "…implies a unilateral not reciprocal foundation: it goes up to the caused from the cause but never goes back to the cause from the cause."[115] This, of course, is fundamentally implied from the principle of analogy concerning God-talk. The property of causality observed in the world can be analogically predicated of God, yet only if it is understood to be fundamentally inadequate. Marion is correct to conclude, "…[T]his Thomistic reform of causality allows the cause to produce the *esse commune* while transcending it completely."[116] Because the causality of God is not necessarily one that must be confined to an efficient cause within a metaphysical scheme due to a multivocity in the definition of causality, Aquinas weaves analogically a theology of creation that has both the kataphatic and the apophatic operating as two sides of the same coin. Our analogies are still by nature inadequate, even when they refer to causality.

For Aquinas, this understanding of causality is crucial for demonstrating that God is not the *causa sui* of onto-theology. Because God's mode of causality is distinct (though not necessarily separate) from that of the causality that exists within a creation that must necessarily have a cause, it is implied that God is not categorically bound to any type of prior cause. As Marion states, "…for Aquinas, the infinite and final cause can (i.e. God) only conclude a finite causality."[117] If God is outside the limitations of causality assigned to the essence of all causes of creation, then this implies God's transcendence of creation's finite categories of what might be understood as a "first cause."[118]

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[115] Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being,* 217-18, Kindle.

[116] Ibid., 218, Kindle.

[117] Ibid., 222-23, Kindle.

[118] Marion also notes that Aquinas rejects God as *causa sui* because it is both logically contradictory and implying that God is confined to the bounds of natural causality. See Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being*, 222-224, Kindle; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.3.7.

Likewise, Aquinas' *analogia entis* must be understood along these lines. Recall

the distinction between metaphysical theology[119] and theology according to revelation.

For Aquinas, metaphysical theology seeks to come to an understanding of God strictly

through his effects in creation without revealing the nature of God's essence. Only

theology developed from revelation can properly be said to reveal some of the essence of

God to mankind. Aquinas makes this distinction when he says, "Theologia ergo

philosophica determinat de separatis secundo modo sicut de subjectis, de separatis autem

primo modo sicut de principiis subjectis. Theologia vero sacrae Scripturae tractat de

separatis primo modo sicut de subjectis."[120] From this Marion asserts that, in

metaphysical theology, God in his essence is never completely a subject of inquiry; at

best, God is only identified conventionally as the ground of common being. For Aquinas,

says Marion, "…God does not belong to metaphysical theology precisely insofar as He

remains the principle of the subject of metaphysics, that is, of entity inasmuch as it is

entity."[121]

From this consideration, it is apparent that God is outside of the limit delegated to

created *ens commune* when it comes to the sharing of being. The *ens commune* is

dependent upon God as principle and foundation, but God is not therefore contained

within the horizon of being that is fundamental to creation. Aquinas states in his

commentary on the *Divine Names* (also quoted by Marion), "Primo quidem quantum ad

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[119] Marion innovates the term "metaphysical theology;" Aquinas does not use this term. The distinction between the meaning of the term and that of revelational theology still stands.

[120] Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethi de Trinitate*, ed. B. Decker, in *Opuscula Omnia*, ed. R. P. Mandonnet (Paris, FR: Lethielleux, 1927), 195, quoted in Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-Theology," in *God Without Being*, 272.

[121] Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being*, 208, Kindle.

hoc quod alia existentia dependent ab esse communi, non autem Deus, sed magis esse commune a Deo . . . Secundo, quantum ad hoc quod omnia existentia continentur sub ipso esse communi, non autem Deus, sed magis esse commune continetur sub ejus virtute, quia virtus divina plus extenditur quam ipsum esse creatum."[122] Since there is thus a unilateral foundational relationship between God and *ens commune* in which the foundation goes from God to common being without any reciprocation, this allows for the possibility that the analogy of being can be posited in Aquinas' thought without thereby rendering God as the simultaneously ground and grounded *causa sui*. God is the means by which metaphysical entities subsist and can be thought without being confined as a proper subject for metaphysical enquiry. The actual being of God, however it may be, cannot be equated with the *ens commune* of creation, but only analogized.

Conclusion

For Aquinas, Dionysius' approach to kataphatic and apophatic theology was significantly influential in his thought concerning the content and limits of God-talk. Though many of his explicit disputational quotations of Dionysius seemed to call into question what may be viewed as extreme apophaticism, the Dionysian method was implicitly formative in Aquinas' theological epistemology, particularly his doctrine of the names of God. Throughout his extensive discussion on matters metaphysical and theological, Aquinas was careful to approach his work with the Dionysian view that the attributes of God could never be univocal with those found in creation (while also never being purely equivocal).

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[122] Aquinas, *De Divinis nominibus Expositio* 5.2.660, quoted in Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *God Without Being*, 273.

However, Jones' insights into Aquinas' reading of Dionysius should be kept in mind. Aquinas' appropriation of the Dionysian method favored heavily on the epistemological aspect of the method, leaving the hymnological and aesthetic emphases mostly unexplored. While some may argue that the purpose of the *Summa Theologiae* is an effort of praise, this is not explicit in Book 1 of Aquinas' text and would need further development.[123] Though it is not out of the question (and indeed quite possible given Aquinas's work on sacramental theology and his mystical epiphany later in his life), Aquinas' use of the Dionysian method ultimately highlighted the epistemological import of it over the doxological.

Hans Urs von Balthasar and Dionysius

In many ways, the appropriation of Dionysius by Hans Urs von Balthasar represents an aesthetic emphasis in the Dionysian method that Aquinas appeared to lack. Though Balthasar's theological aesthetics in the volumes that make up *The Glory of the Lord* also draw upon a number of other early Christian thinkers along with Dionysius, there is a sense there that Dionysius plays an important role in Balthasar's aesthetic reversal of Kant's priority of reason in apprehending the divine. For Balthasar, Dionysius is a significant iteration of his model of a theological aesthetics as the foundation of theology in concert with how the early church fathers operated. Dionysius was viewed by Balthasar as a prime example of bringing theology in the service of aesthetic apprehension, and thus an example of "seeing the Form" *par excellence*, within the

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[123] See David Burrell and Isabelle Moulin, "Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius," In *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite, eds. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2009), 108, Kindle.

context of early church thought, and it is with this in mind that Balthasar incorporates the Dionysian method within his theological aesthetics.

<div align="center">Balthasar and The Glory of the Lord</div>

One must first get a bearing upon the overall project of Balthasar's theological aesthetics before discussing what Dionysius specifically means to his theological project. There are three fundamental phases to Balthasar's project: the aesthetic, the dramatic, and the logic. *The Glory of the Lord* corresponds to the aesthetic element of Balthasar's theology, which is also, for Balthasar, the foundation upon which he builds his theology. Balthasar rightly observes the lack of aesthetics as a central part of theological discourse in the modern West; rather, it has been a peripheral consideration at best:

> Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. Beauty is the disinterested one, without which the ancient world refused to understand itself, a word which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice and sadness. No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face which threaten to become incomprehensible to man. We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it.[124]

Balthasar responds to this lack of aesthetic emphasis by negating the modern, post-Kantian view of aesthetics and returning to more classical conceptions of the beautiful divine, including that of the church fathers. Balthasar is intending to retrieve the mentality of seeing God as fundamentally beautiful (though, as shall be shown below,

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[124] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, eds. Joseph Fessio, S. J., and John Riches (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), loc. 172-181, Kindle.

this does not entail that God as fundamentally good, true, and Being is negated in this

proposition).

Balthasar bases his theological aesthetics in what appears to be a

phenomenological approach, an approach that begins with the perception of the classic

transcendentals of the Beautiful, the Good, and the True (all which correspond to his

theological aesthetics, dramatics, and logic, respectively). Of course, Balthasar is not

doing phenomenology in the sense it was done in his time, where perception was

primarily an epistemological horizon.[125] Again, there is a sense that this

"phenomenology" is based upon classical sensibilities about reality that even predate

Christianity, including those of ancient Greece. For Balthasar, the Good and the True are

not purely distinct categories, but are instead involved in a dance with the Beautiful.

Thus, the Beautiful is simultaneously the Good and the True. This perception is what

differentiates the more rationalist *pistis* and the intimate *gnosis* that belongs to true faith,

a faith that is compelled not just by propositional truths but also by the drawing beauty of

God.[126] From this foundation, Balthasar then goes on to use the *analogia entis* to identify

God as the transcendent source and cause of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In

particular, Balthasar views the revelation found in the incarnation of Christ Jesus as the

fulcrum of how aesthetics and culture in general are to be viewed and evaluated, since He

is the prime display of the transcendental forms. In Christ, the beauty of God is revealed

simultaneously with the glory of the perfect man whose "…concordance between his task

and his existence may be traced back to the fact that he does not do his own will but that

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[125] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, loc. 276-285, Kindle.

[126] Ibid., loc. 2049-2139, Kindle.

of the Father, that he has not therefore given himself this task but rather accepted it in obedience."[127] Thus, Christ represents the ideal harmony between divinity and humanity realized. In all, Balthasar is interested in bringing aesthetics as the first principle of theology, with ethics and logic being developed once the fundamental aesthetic has been described. As intimated earlier, this is an intentional reversal of Immanuel Kant's trilogy of critiques that begin with pure reason, then practical reason, and finally aesthetics. This is not merely a stylistic convention, but an intentional symbolic reversal of modern thought's tendency to privilege reason as superior to aesthetic matters.

In Volume II of *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar deals with what he calls "clerical styles" of doing theology that have this aesthetic element as foundational during early and medieval church history. Balthasar summarizes the purpose of the project of volume II by iterating, "…[I]t must be emphasized that the formal object of this investigation is the glory of the divine revelation itself, in the multiplicity of its manifestations and understandings, and then, certainly, within that glory theological beauty as such, in its transcendence over all models of secular beauty."[128] Balthasar foreshadows in the beginning of Volume 1, "God's truth is, indeed, great enough to allow an infinity of approaches and entryways."[129] This general sentiment is why Balthasar is concerned about the variety of perspectives that may see the Form that is the incarnate Christ. The goal is to show how different subjects react to the revealed Form that is

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[127] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, loc. 7623, Kindle.

[128] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* vol 2., *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, Frances McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, C. R. V., ed. John Riches (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), loc. 267, Kindle.

[129] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, loc. 156, Kindle.

Christ and how these subjects did so on a fundamentally aesthetic level typical of much

of classical thought.

One must first take note of Balthasar's intentions in incorporating Dionysius

within his own theological effort. Many scholars have been critical of the somewhat

subjective nature by which Balthasar treats the church fathers, Dionysius included.

According to Tasmin Jones, "Balthasar's primary motive in 'listening to the Fathers' is to

learn how to *translate* (and not simply *replicate*) them into something of value for his

own intellectual context. Those unsatisfied with his approach most often accuse Balthasar

of 'eclecticism' and also a certain "ahistoricism'."[130] Balthasar is open about how he is

not intending to be an independent and objective exhibitioner of the texts of the church

fathers:

> Being faithful to tradition most definitely does not consist . . . [in] a literal
> repetition and transmission of the philosophical and theological theses that one
> imagines lie hidden in time and in the contingencies of history. Rather, being
> faithful to tradition consists much more in imitating our Fathers in the faith with
> respect to their attitude of intimate reflection and their effort of audacious
> creation, which are the necessary preludes to true spiritual fidelity. If we study the
> past, it is not in the hope of drawing from it formulas doomed in advance to
> sterility or with the intention of readapting out-of-date solutions.[131]

Certainly it could be argued that, though Balthasar is not exactly exhuming and exegeting

the text on an objective sense, he nevertheless can unearth important aspects that some

may miss through his theological efforts. As Charles Kannengiesser describes Balthasar's

patristic retrieval, "Von Balthasar focused his contemplative eye on trying to merge the

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[130] Tasmin Jones, "Dionysius in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, eds. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2009), 216, Kindle.

[131] Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: an Essay on the Religious Philosoply of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 12, quoted in Brian E. Daley, "Balthasar's Reading of the Church Fathers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, S. J., and David Moss (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 189, Kindle.

demands of modernity, as he experienced it, with the spiritual and metaphysical treasures of the Fathers whose meaning he kept probing."[132] Still, it is true that Balthasar's usage of Dionysius was through a particular theological lens (though to a lesser extent than Aquinas, as will be seen below).

However one may evaluate Balthasar's retrieval of the fathers, it will be shown that he was nevertheless keenly aware of a methodology present within the Dionysian corpus, a methodology that affected the form of the Dionysian corpus as well as its substance. Balthasar's sense of what Dionysius was trying to accomplish in his writings with regard to theological aesthetics offers a complementary perspective of the Dionysian method alongside Aquinas' sense.

<div align="center">Balthasar on Dionysius</div>

Balthasar admits of the simultaneously kataphatic and apophatic movements found within the Dionysian corpus, or, as Balthasar puts it, "…the manifestation of the unmanifest."[133] For Balthasar, the theophanic manifestation of God is simultaneously real and indicating a real distance beyond comprehension, evoking the Neoplatonic theme turned Christian of procession and return as well as that of immanence and transcendence. For Dionysius, "…every manifestation, even within this world, is such a manifestation of the unmanifest: were the external splendour of the beautiful and of order not the splendour of a mysterious depth—of being, still more of life, still more of spirit— then it would not be the beautiful and would not awaken reverence before the 'sacred

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[132] Charles Kannengiesser "Listening to the Fathers," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), loc. 1233, Kindle.

[133] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, loc. 2435, Kindle.

mystery made manifest.'"[134] For Balthasar, this structure of procession and return is the fundamental fulcrum by which aesthetic information about God can be displayed while simultaneously allowing a consciousness of God's glory exceeding the manifestation for Dionysius. In the creation, "…there is a proportion suitable to the creature between the manifestation and what it is that (unmanifestly) is manifest, even if there is a gradually increasing transcendence of the comprehensible relation."[135] This proportional relation is what fundamentally justifies ascribing to God all names and simultaneously no name within the *Divine Names*. For Balthasar, this is the root of Dionysius' aesthetic perception of the divine from which negative theology is sprung. The transcendent God simultaneously "…gives to the realms of creation a share in himself while safeguarding the immanent order of all things."[136]

From this conceptual fulcrum, it is clear that Balthasar has in mind the *analogia entis* as a necessary theme for understanding Dionysius' doctrine of divine names, as did Aquinas. However, Balthasar goes further by picking up on the disposition of praise found within the Dionysian corpus. "Theology is exhausted in the act of wondering adoration before the unsearchable beauty in every manifestation. It is knowledge, *gnosis*, but knowledge that answers to the mystery of beauty in a beautiful fashion, which is to say in a manner fitting, apt, poised (*symmetrōs, en symmetriā*)."[137] What Balthasar sees in Dionysius is a tripartite method that goes beyond kataphatic attribution followed by apophatic denial. In Dionysius there is a third step that is to hymn or praise, this third step

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[134] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, loc. 2435, Kindle.

[135] Ibid., loc. 2435-2442, Kindle.

[136] Ibid., loc. 2341-2350, Kindle.

[137] Ibid., loc. 2520-2529, Kindle.

being enabled by the first two and also the final step that justifies the disciplines found in

the first two. Balthasar puts this Dionysian interplay in vivid language when he says,

> If the manner of theology is 'holy measure,' its sound is 'holy celebration'.
> Because God is in all things and above all things, being and knowing can only be
> a festival and a 'dance', a continuous 'celebration' of the glory that communicates
> itself and holds sway in all things and above all things, a 'hymn', a 'song of
> praise', which has its own laws which must be followed in everything from its
> basic conception, the choice of point of view, right down to the least form of
> expression.[138]

The 'laws' refer to the fact that, according to Dionysius, everything is simultaneously a

means of praise to God (whether word, concept, liturgy, icon, or any object of creation)

and a veil that conceals the comprehensive depth of God from the admirer. Of course,

this aspect of veiling found in all things operates as another catalyst for praising the

invisible God as invisible.[139]

Conclusion

It is from this view of Dionysius' apophatic hymnology that Balthasar can claim

that Dionysius, the archetypal negative theologian of Christianity, "…can be regarded as

the most aesthetic of all Christian theologians, because the aesthetic transcendence that

we know in this world… provides the formal schema for understanding theological or

mystical transcendence (from the world to God)."[140] All theophany of divine beauty is

simultaneously informative about and veiling the glory of God, neither purely univocal

nor purely equivocal but expressing an immeasurable place between both poles. From the

testimony of Dionysius, Balthasar sees a crucial corrective to modern tendencies that

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[138] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, loc. 2549-2558, Kindle.

[139] Ibid., loc. 2566, Kindle.

[140] Ibid., loc. 2491, Kindle.

focus on rational understanding without an aim to praise and glorification. Thus, Balthasar provides a key perspective on the form of the Dionysian methodology in which a meta-theology is fundamentally in view. In Dionysius, Balthasar channels the neglect of praise and glory in much of theological literature in the West. Certainly, Balthasar's more apparent appreciation for the liturgical and hymnological aspects of the Dionysius corpus provides a complementary and supplementary approach to the Dionysian method alongside Aquinas' more epistemological leanings. Where Aquinas primarily emphasized the theological aspects of the Dionysian method, Balthasar with equal force emphasizes the aesthetic and doxological meta-theological implications of the Dionysian method.

Concluding Remarks on Aquinas, Balthasar, and the Dionysian Method

As stated before, the preceding two sections concerning the appropriation of Dionysius by Aquinas and Balthasar were intended to display the fact that both of these theologians were examples of seeing the form of the Dionysian method, with Aquinas emphasizing the theological end and Balthasar emphasizing the meta-theological aesthetic/hymnological end. Much like how Balthasar viewed the early fathers' apprehension of the transcendental Form in Christ, two different theologians in two very different times and cultures have both seen in Dionysius a vital theological form that is corrective to a hyper-rationalist approach to relating to God.

Thus Dionysius and his method of viewing theology, despite current postmodern fascination, is most truly effective and meaningful within the revelational context of orthodox Christianity. To assign Dionysius as merely a forefather of deconstructionist theories of language is to ignore the cultural, liturgical, and confessional context that necessarily forms his concerns about theological language. It is not necessary, however,

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to say that Dionysius is completely irrelevant to postmodern concerns. As has been shown earlier, the Dionysian methodology is able to sidestep the charge of onto-theology, an issue that is relevant both inside and outside postmodernism. Marion among others have shown that Dionysius is hardly sneaking in a *causa sui* through the back door in positing negative theology. That being given, it is clear that Dionysius' methodology can be used within theological systems that are not overly radical in themselves, as in the case of Aquinas and Balthasar. Dionysius is not directly concerned with philosophical debates about language in general, but rather the nature of theological language and the purpose of this theological language discovered through doing theology well.

Practical Application of the Dionysian Method

In light of this discussion, there lies the question of the merit of this methodology. Why should anyone studying the things of God, including academic theologians, consciously operate with this methodology in mind? This question is certainly confounded by the fact that most lay Western Christians, regardless of denomination and particularly in more conservative Protestant ends, are not encouraged to keep their conceptual picture of God in check to the degree encouraged by Dionysius. If this kind of view of theology is so often discarded, why implement what seems to be unnecessary for the vast majority of functioning Christian cultures?

In response, the answer to this question could be given in a number of ways, not all of which is permitted by room here. However, it will do to give two "macro" answers under which it appears most "micro" answers to the question seem to fall. The first answer involves further development on the first commandment against idolatry in Exodus 20:3-5: "…you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for

yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down or worship them…" The second involves practical matters for those who are ardent students of theology, especially those who are being formally educated in the discipline.

Dionysian Method and Idolatry

In contemporary times, it hardly crosses the average lay believer's mind that idolatry is a real problem. According to many lay Christians, idols are not a valid issue in today's Western society, nor are they a meaningful temptation. Our society is substantially different than, say, ancient Israel, where physical idol worship was a genuine possibility in order to generate positive agricultural or familial outcomes. Therefore, according to some, the sin of idolatry was more relevant to ancient cultures than it is today.

Of course, there are some that are more aware than others about conceptual idolatry like nationalism, racism, sexism, and other ideologies that may take the place of God and his teaching. These inclinations often shoehorn God as someone "on their side" when it comes to these manmade ideologies. This is precisely where the Dionysian method is able to make a crucial corrective to these tendencies. The Dionysian method is one that forces the believer to always view her idea of God with a critical eye. Interpretation and theological conceptualization is always viewed as slippery for the practitioner of Dionysian methodology. One's ideas must always be provisional and changeable when confronted with evidence that counters them.

The need for such flexibility has been exasperated by the rise of modernism, postmodernism, and globalism in recent years. For the Dionysian, there is an openness to

hear critiques of one's ideas about God from any perspective, including ones of nonbelievers. In other words, Dionysius did not implement his theology strictly within the construct of polemics. In his seventh letter, Dionysius writes to Polycarp, "I have never wished to embark on controversies with Greeks or with any others. It is enough for me first to know about the truth and then to speak appropriately of what I know."[141] The Dionysian openly welcomes all attempts at idol smashing that may occur within our thought life concerning who God is and what God prioritizes, regardless of whether or not such a critique comes from a position of faith. Her idea of God is not an unchangeable monolith, but instead is more like a block of marble that one must try to chip away at and form into the most appropriate image of God possible in this life.

Another point of relevancy for this aspect of the Dionysian method is providing an alternative to the postmodern approach to theology. To their credit, postmodernists have come to the realization that the prevailing "totalizing metanarratives" of modernism (whether it be classical Marxism or the Enlightenment ideals that led to Nazism) ultimately fail to get at an objective sense of truth and inflict conceptual (and even physical) violence in the process to the exclusion of what is overlooked in these ideologies. Onto-theology is, of course, one of these narratives that have been subject to critique in this postmodern process. As indicated earlier, since metaphysics, defined as onto-theology, has been shown to be deficient in encompassing the truth of being, philosophers of religion in the Continental tradition have been debating since the middle of the 20th century as to whether talk about God is possible outside of the domain of onto-theology.

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[141] Dionysius, "Letter Seven," in *The Complete Works*, 267.

This is fundamentally the reason that contemporary philosophers have been reaching back to retrieve Dionysius' insight. Dionysius is a crucial touchstone in the debate between Christianity's ability or inability to transcend onto-theological talk. However, these postmodern retrievals are not without their problems. Many have thought that Dionysius is virtually a full-on deconstructionist, critiquing the reliability of language in general when getting at the truth of any matter. For example, Jeffrey Fisher argues that "…Dionysius engages in an apophaticism of the most radical kind…and…Dionysian negative theology is significantly compatible with certain aspects of Derridean deconstruction."[142] Many others, like Derrida and Caputo, taking the notion of deconstruction as the standard means of dismantling onto-theology, have doubts as to whether onto-theology has been avoided by Dionysius. Derrida purports that, while negative theology of the Dionysian variety intends to deny God the finite category of existence and presence, it does so "…only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being."[143] Caputo likewise affirms that apophaticism sneaks the concept of being for God in through the back door: "So when the negative theologian, falling upon our breast and looking up to heaven, sighs that she cannot name or say a thing about God, she also knows, in secret, even if she knows by unknowing, that if we call the Vatican guards on her, she has an answer. Way down deep, negative theologians know what they are talking about; they have not entirely lost their

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[142] Ronald Jeffrey Fisher, "The Theology of Dis/Similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Journal of Religion* 81, no.4 (2001): 530, accessed February 7, 2017, http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f82f1ea1-4a7a-49f5-a7be-b834d1af4a12%40sessionmgr120&vid=22&hid=118.

[143] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

way or their balance…"[144] For Caputo, "…negative theology drops anchor, hits bottom, lodges itself securely in pure presence and the transcendental signified, every bit as much as any positive onto-theo-logy…"[145] Thus, for many more secular practitioners of deconstruction, negative theology ultimately fails to transcend onto-theology in a way that satisfies their criteria.

However, these contentions of whether Dionysius is a good or bad deconstructionist are fundamentally missing the revelational and liturgical context that the Dionysian corpus presupposes. Language is not viewed as slippery and unreliable as a whole; rather, language is meaningful only because it relates to the fact of a self-communicating God from which creation proceeds and then returns in eschatological fulfillment.[146] Conor McDonough rightly notes that the deconstructionist assessment of Dionysius has mistakenly identified negative theology as primarily concerned with language, when in fact the foundational focus is a particular *theology* from which a hermeneutic then arises. "For him [Dionysius], cataphasis is just as essential as apophasis, and our approach to God is essentially dialectical. Far from smuggling 'presence' in through the back door…Denys is open in his espousing of the 'metaphysics of presence' (as well as disavowing it)."[147]

Because the Dionysian method comes from the background of faith, it may serve as a corrective for some of the misunderstandings that are present in postmodernism, while simultaneously highlighting the benefits that have emerged from postmodern

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[144] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), loc. 710, Kindle.

[145] Ibid.

[146] McDonough, "Grounding Speech and Silence," 64-66.

[147] Ibid., 60.

critiques of modernism and the Enlightenment. Once it is understood that Dionysius functions exclusively within the Christian revelational and liturgical context, rather than merely foreshadowing deconstructionist skepticism toward language, the Dionysian method serves as a way of approving what is good about the postmodern turn while also critiquing the modernist assumptions that still lie latent within postmodern thought.

Dionysian Method and the Study of Theology

It is a common threat to anyone studying theology, particularly those who have invested time and resources into graduate level formal education, that in the process one may become "burnt out" or spiritually dry in the process. There is always a possibility coming out of theological study that the endeavor ends up making a more clever devil, to use C. S. Lewis' phraseology. On the one hand, intellectual elitism can develop in a student of theology when the student feels a sense of superiority over the mass of average believers because she has "done the research." Not only can this foster a kind of resentment towards fellow believers, but it can also be a means of stunting spiritual growth. If a student believes that her academic Bible studies inherently bring one to spiritual growth and sanctification, and are therefore ends in themselves, this may foster the belief, whether conscious or subconscious, that little more spiritual growth is needed for her in this life. Conversely, a student who views theological education as an end in itself can also find herself spiritually unfulfilled, since such an expectation assumes that gaining intellectual understanding about the things of God inevitably leads to a more vibrant and joyful spiritual life. Seminars on theology student burnout commonly held at many schools show that this implication is not necessarily the case. Academics can feel

more like a burden than a feast to many students, regardless of the importance of the subject matter.

The Dionysian method is helpful in studying theology precisely because it does not treat theology as an end in itself. Dionysius understood that praising and enjoying God is the primary end to all Christian activity, including academic theological studies. The method is a reminder of the fundamental purpose of studying good theology, which is to generate good doxology. Conversely, doxology as an end in itself can have a significant effect on evaluating the relevance of particular matters of theological debate. Keeping the goal of right praise of God in mind can be a means of weeding out theological speculation that has little relevance to this end. This is, of course, not a plea to limit all studies to the topic of theology proper, for Dionysius is quick to name God as Cause of all of creation. In fact, for Dionysius there is a sense that all studies, including science and history, are rightly ordered to the praise of God. The Dionysian *Symbolic Theology* appears to affirm (at least from what can be interpolated from references to it) that God is named through amoebas and Neanderthals as much as through the standard categories that typically belong to theology.

Conclusion

Dionysius invites the believer to constantly maintain open-mindedness in the intellectual pursuit of God, as well as to let the mind fuel the heart in the pursuit of praising the invisible Creator. The apophatic method found within the Dionysian method teaches that all revelation and knowledge concerning the divine is valuable, indeed necessary. However, one crucial truth found in revelation is the fundamental incomprehensibility of God to man's finite mind. This is not to show the failure of revelation to convey what

God intended; rather, it is primarily a function of instilling humility in the student of theology by instructing her to read the text with an open heart and a willingness to critique one's conceptions and interpretations. The text is a necessary springboard on the way to appreciating God with all names and as nameless.

Thomas Aquinas and Hans Urs von Balthasar were two significantly disparate theologians who both "saw the form" of the Dionysian method, each with their particular emphasis. Their incorporating of the Dionysian method shows that Dionysius' thought is most adequately done within a confessional and revelational context, rather than being merely limited to radically skeptical modes of theology such as can be found in postmodern circles. Dionysian apophaticism does not leave behind all kataphatic talk about God, but instead recognizes apophaticism as the other side of the coin. Scripture and liturgy (as well as natural theology as legitimated by revelation) are never abandoned by Dionysius, but are the indispensable catalysts to a greater apophatic consciousness regarding the divine and his ineffable nature. Aquinas and Balthasar's recognition of this dual-natured aspect of good theology shows how applicable the Dionysian method is to orthodox Christianity without sacrificing any orthodoxy that may be discouraged in some postmodernist thought.

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