

## PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS ON THE ECSTATIC IN THE DIVINE ASCENT OF THE SOUL

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Pseudo-Dionysius' vision for *ένωσις* is differentiated from neo-Platonism by the concept of *έκστασις* that the Areopagite suggests as a principle of achieving *ένωσις*. What makes the soul yearn to return to God is not its inherent divine sparkle, but rather the divine grace that invites the soul to an epistemological leap over the ontological gap between the Creator and his creation. The double of *άγάπη* and *έρως* through which God is ecstatically engaged in the world are offered to the human kind to respond with its own ecstasy in the ascent to unity with God. The result is a dynamichierarchical movement in which the whole universe eventually participates in the divine through the *μόνη*, *πρόδος*, and *έπιστροφή* where each hierarchy is perfecting or being perfected or both while joining the choir of created beings giving praise to the source of all being, "approximating as closely as possible to the divine."

**Keywords:** *ένωσις*, *άγάπη*, *έρως*, *έκστασις*, *sensible*, *intelligible*, *άναθορυβήσαι*.

The main goal of Pseudo-Dionysius' works is to reconcile the hierarchical system of neo-Platonism with a Christian understanding of creation. In neo-Platonism, the world came into being by a series of processions, each accompanied by a reversion to the first principle, commonly styled as the One or the Good. The higher hierarchies of intelligent beings served as intermediaries for the lower ones. Both Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius tried to explain the existence of the hierarchies avoiding the neo-Platonic teaching that the hierarchies were so disposed due to divine necessity. Origen explained them on the basis of the biblical teaching about the Fall and by the introduction of the doctrine of free will. The hierarchies were the result of their own personal disposition towards evil. Pseudo-Dionysius ascribes the existence of the hierarchies to God – as neo-Platonists did – but in his case these are not emanations but are created *ex nihilo* by the fiat of God's will. All of the hierarchies also tend toward God and the higher serve as intermediaries to the lower.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CH 3.1 (PTS 36: 17.3-5; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 153).

*In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenment divinely given to it.*

This concept led some to understand him more as a Plotinian philosopher than as a Christian writer. However Pseudo-Dionysius differs on one very important point from Plotinus. Whereas for Plotinus ἔνωσις, or union with the Good or the One is an immanent act in which the soul escapes this fallen condition of plurality and unites to the divine by becoming that which one used to be – lost in the divine simplicity – for Pseudo-Dionysius the ἔνωσις is not going back to one’s true being but rather going out of oneself (ἔκστασις) and uniting with utterly other than what human beings are. The ontological gap between God and the world is overcome not by “nature” but by the ἔκστασις of God toward man and the ἔκστασις of man toward God on the basis of God’s grace. In this theological concept we see the attempt to co-ordinate the biblical witness of God’s utter otherness and the Hellenistic teaching of the unity of existence. As John Zizioulas comments, “The principal object of this theology is to remove the question of truth and knowledge from the domain of Greek theories of ontology in order to situate it within that of love and communion.”<sup>2</sup> In his *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* Pseudo-Dionysius comments that deification:<sup>3</sup>

*... consists of being as much as possible like and in union with God. The common goal of every hierarchy consists of the continuous love of God and of things divine, a love which is sacredly worked out in an inspired and unique way, and, before this, the complete and unswerving avoidance of everything contrary to it. It consists of a knowledge of beings as they really are. It consists of both the seeing and the understanding of sacred truth. It consists of an inspired participation in the one-like perfection and in the one itself, as far as possible. It consists of a feast upon that sacred vision which nourishes the intellect and which divinizes everything rising up to it.*

The only way we can know something about God is first by way of ascension in which we analogically ascend toward that which is knowable of God; this we do by positive analogous affirmations: “God is like...” But once we have reached the peak of that

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<sup>2</sup> Zizioulas 1985: 91-92.

<sup>3</sup> EH 1.3 (PTS 36: 66.14-19; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 198).

knowability, we realize that all of that does not even come close to God's inner reality. The only appropriate way to know God is by unknowing (ἀγνωσία). In *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* Vladimir Lossky elaborates the meaning of ἀγνωσία: "Proceeding by negations one ascends from inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance."<sup>4</sup>

Both kataphatic and apophatic language about God come to a final silence. God is simply beyond all denials and assertions. However, this is not to finally invalidate them as ultimately futile or absurd. The whole speech of God's essential unknowability safeguards Dionysius' system from lapsing into neo-Platonic ontology. The goal of this language is not silence but praise. The moment when all language and intellectual concepts have been exhausted is not moment of meaninglessness, a mental equivalent of peeling an onion, but rather to a glorious discovery of hidden beauty. Dionysius compares this to the process of carving a sculpture. It is a process of taking away that which hides "the hidden image."<sup>5</sup> But what does this process of true seeing and knowing involve? According to the Areopagite it means "to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings."<sup>6</sup>

Praise seems to be the evidence of the harmonious hierarchical μόνη, πρόδος, and ἐπιστροφή. Each hierarchy is perfecting or being perfected or both while joining the choir of created beings giving praise to the source of all being. Thus a hierarchy, through its praise of God, "approximating as closely as possible to the divine,"<sup>7</sup> functions as theophany. The more approximate and closer they come to God, each in accord with its given capacity, God's glory shines more effulgently. In other words, the praise does not come from some moral obligation, but rather it flows from the closer resemblance of God. The theophany is itself an act of praise. The more transparent the theophany, the greater the praise. This is how this looks in case of human beings: "In most holy contemplation we shall be ever filled with the sight of God shining gloriously around us as once it shone for the disciples at the divine

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<sup>4</sup> Lossky 1976: 25.

<sup>5</sup> MT 2 (PTS 36: 145.13; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 138).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 145.4-5; 138.

<sup>7</sup> CH 3.1 (PTS 36: 17.4; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 153).

transfiguration. ... and we shall have a conceptual gift of light from him ... we shall be united with him.”<sup>8</sup> Dionysius’ connection of the transfiguration of the incarnated Christ with the condition of those united with him confirms his commitment to treat visible creation as a means of theophany, or rather as theophany itself, which is made possible by God’s ἔκστασις.<sup>9</sup>

*And ... his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. ... He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (ἀγάπη) and by yearning (ἔρωσ) and is enticed away from his eternal dwelling place and comes to abide in all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic (ἐκστατική) capacity to remain nevertheless, within himself.*

God is present in every molecule of being. The one who drinks a drop of water swallows the divine as it is totally present in it. And yet one can drink the whole ocean without exhausting a single particle of that same divine. The goodness of God expresses itself in love (ἀγάπη) and yearning (ἔρωσ). God, the first principle, himself is ἀγάπη / ἔρωσ for the Areopagite. It should be noted that this is not the case with Proclus from whom he borrows so much. John Rist comments that because of this Proclus’ God cannot be ἔρωσ e0kstatiko&j. Rist goes to say: “The first person to combine the neo-Platonic ideas about God as Eros with the notion of God’s ecstasy is Pseudo-Dionysius.”<sup>10</sup>

Although for the Areopagite ἀγάπη and ἔρωσ are interchangeable he takes the latter as a superior illustration of God’s ἔκστασις.<sup>11</sup> This agapetic and erotic ἔκστασις leads towards the diversification of the world and at the same time is its unifying force. It does so in three movements: “It binds the things of the same order ... It moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, and it stirs the subordinate in a return toward the superior.”<sup>12</sup> Through his ἔκστασις, God engrafts his ἔρωσ in the Universe that should serve as the driving power of the return of the multitude beings of each hierarchy towards unity with God. Thus the appropriate response of intelligible beings towards God is also *ecstatic*. Human beings are called to go outside of themselves in order to meet

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<sup>8</sup> DN 1.4 (PTS 33: 114.11-115.1; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 52).

<sup>9</sup> DN 4.13 (PTS 33: 159.9-14; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 82).

<sup>10</sup> Rist 1996: 239.

<sup>11</sup> DN 4.12 (PTS 33: 156.20-157.17; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 81).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.16-19; 81.

the God who is coming outside of himself. This mutually *ecstatic* meeting is a genuine divine human interaction that results in *theosis*. What keeps the *ecstatic* elements together is not ontology, but epistemology. It is an erotic encounter where two ultimately unlike sides truly *know* each other. This knowledge is a source of peace. The Areopagite tells us that, "... everything wishes for peace."<sup>13</sup> In other words, while the different creatures guard their individuality, they want to be in harmony with each other and ultimately with God. This is how the Areopagite envisions peace: "And perfect Peace is there as a gift, guarding without confusion the individuality of each ... ensuring ... that all things are unshakably what they are and that they have peace and rest."<sup>14</sup>

Peace thus is closely connected to the harmony of the hierarchies. The peace of each individual member of each hierarchy ensures the harmony of the whole. If it is traced backwards, a pattern of return (ἐπιστροφή) can be discerned. Peace leads to harmony, harmony completes *theophany* wh *Kállος* ich in turn reveals God's glory ultimately represented in the beautiful (καλόν) and the good (κάλλος). Goodness, Dionysius tells us is the highest divine attribute displayed by kataphatic theology.<sup>15</sup> But a little later he identifies the good with the beautiful.<sup>16</sup> It follows from this that the diversified attributes cohere in the divine simplicity. The final step then of the return is in "... the interrelationship of all things in accordance with capacity. Hence, the harmony and the love which are formed between them but which do not obliterate identity."<sup>17</sup> The Areopagite goes on to describe this unity in diversity, claiming that all things share an "innate togetherness" in the incessant flow of movement and rest, emergence and return. All of this is so because of God's will that is the cause of everything, and it is in him that all creation finds its ultimate meaning. One is not surprised when Dionysius locates this ultimate meaning in ἔρωσ and κάλλος: "The divine longing (ἔρωσ) is Good seeking good for the sake of the Good."<sup>18</sup> We are faced with Dionysian apophaticism in an attempt to name the nameless. This seeking to understand the inner logic of the

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<sup>13</sup> DN 11.3 (PTS 33: 219.25; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 123).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 220.7-8; 123.

<sup>15</sup> DN 4.1 (PTS 33: 143.9.144.9; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 71).

<sup>16</sup> DN 4.7 (PTS 33: 151.18-152.9; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 77).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 152.19-21; 77.

<sup>18</sup> DN 4.10 (PTS 33: 155.16-17; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 79).

divine by spoken words can end up only in *unsaying*. That can probably explain the Areopagite's fondness for ἔρωϛ. Ἐρωϛ is a most elusive word to define. It first of all stands for the erotic longing that signals *presence* rather than explanation. This concept connects Dionysius conceptually with one of the other great champions of the erotic, Gregory of Nyssa and his *epicstasy*; the never-ending pursuit of God where the arousal is fed by the thrill of always coming within reach of the Beloved and always being lured to a different meeting place of new excitement. According to Dionysius this, "... divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved."<sup>19</sup> This is a bold statement indeed. It tells us that ultimately even God does not belong to himself, but to those he loves, that is the whole universe. Of course this is not so because God is in some sort of need, or an act to reverse his own diminishment that was caused by emanation. This erotic ecstasy is God's personal act that calls into relationship all the beings that can respond to it. When they do, they gain not only the vision of Beauty or Goodness itself, but they engage in a relationship with the source of beauty and goodness. This is in opposition to Plato's description of acquiring the vision of beauty through ἔρωϛ, since in Plato's case one enters a condition of erotic knowledge of the thing one participates in.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the Areopagite, one enters a relationship of erotic knowledge of the subject one participates in. The idea is that love, both ἀγάπη and ἔρωϛ, directs one not towards himself, but always towards the other. Thus this mystical experience of union with God is never a prerogative of the individual as such. It is never a flight of the alone to the Alone. It is rather the collective *uplifting* of each community of the hierarchies into which an individual can participate, and the mystical experience is never individual or esoteric, but ecclesiastical and shared. The soul thus joins the community of the hierarchy as it is uplifted in union with God. But at the same time there must be nothing that stands on the way to this mystical union, neither things, nor concepts. This includes other people too. This is the advice Dionysius gives to his ostensible friend: "By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> DN 4.13 (PTS 33: 158.19.159.1; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 82).

<sup>20</sup> Symp. 211BC.

<sup>21</sup> MT 1.1 (PTS 36: 142.9-11; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 135).

All other attempts to establish meaning in one's existence through *ἔρωσ* that are focused on oneself will result in tragedy, as it has indeed happened in Adam. The absurdity of such *ἔρωσ* is that while serving the selfish purposes of the individual it causes alienation. As individuals look to the others only as means of satisfying their own yearnings such an individualized existence causes division in the one human nature. But once human *ἔρωσ* is transformed in *ἔκστασις* in response to God's ecstatic *ἔρωσ*, the healing or unification of human nature begins. This is well put by the scholiast commenting on the *De divinis nominibus* 4.10: "For the benevolent *ἔρωσ* has moved divinity to think about us and about our creation."<sup>22</sup> Our well-being is to be found only living in accord with that *ἔρωσ* that is given to us as a gift.

When directed to God, *ἔρωσ*, besides being a yearning for unity with him, triggers one to fully participate in the supreme ecstatic act of God, that of the incarnation. The Areopagite quotes Ignatius of Antioch saying, "He for whom I yearn has been crucified."<sup>23</sup> In an article written after the appearance of *Eros and Psyche*, John Rist rescinds his opinion that Dionysius misquotes Ignatius. In this reading Ignatius says that his crucified *ἔρωσ* is Christ, "... he is saying that he desires death because Christ has been crucified and therefore true life is to be found through death."<sup>24</sup> For Dionysius this is not a moral process first of all. It is rather "an enlightenment,"<sup>25</sup> a call to go out of one's human nature and rise up to the divine, on account of the second person of the Trinity sharing our nature.<sup>26</sup> In one of the rare but rich instances of Dionysian consideration of Jesus and the incarnation, the Areopagite elaborates what it means for humanity that God has become human: in this way we can share in his "true beauty."<sup>27</sup> His becoming man has initiated a total change of human nature. All of this resulted in "imitation of God." This imitation is supremely represented in the theurgical act of communal worship and participation in the sacred mystery of the Eucharist. "We do this," says Dionysius "in remembrance of him."<sup>28</sup> What does this

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<sup>22</sup> Scholia on DN 4.10 (PG 4: 261B).

<sup>23</sup> DN 4.12 (PTS 33: 157.11; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 81).

<sup>24</sup> Rist 1964: 206; note 22.

<sup>25</sup> DN 1.4 (PTS 33: 113.12; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 52).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.9-10; 52.

<sup>27</sup> EH 3.11 (PTS 36: 91.14; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 221).

<sup>28</sup> EH 3.12 (PTS 36: 92.4-5; trans. Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 221).

remembrance entail? It entails complete purification from evil as the sharing in the material elements (food) presupposes joined lives in "... full sharing of inspired food."<sup>29</sup> Further, in the reading of the sacred texts during the Eucharist, Dionysius asserts that a "reverent eye" will discern in them

"... something that both brings about unity and manifests a single empathy, of which the source is the spirit of the Deity."<sup>30</sup>

We have come back to the heart of Dionysius' thinking, to that of unity. The whole Dionysian system (if it can be called a system) of hierarchies, cataphatic and apophatic theology, erotic ecstasy, and uplifting, here on the earth is symbolically and mystically re-enacted in the life of the church as body of Christ. It is the point where heaven and earth really meet and announce the ultimate destiny of the whole intelligible creation – to experience *ἔνωσις* with God. On this point Pseudo-Dionysius is especially influential for Maximus. Maximus adopts the idea of *ἔνωσις* with God, and also the system of hierarchies – the most distinctive contribution of the Areopagite for the development of the ascetical and mystical spirituality. He then combines the two – the *ἔνωσις* with God and the hierarchies – and applies them to his own understanding of man as microcosm and mediator, and in whose intelligible/sensible nature happens the overcoming of the divisions of the universe.

With this Pseudo-Dionysius attempts to remain faithful to the biblical endorsement and vindication of the material creation, while indicating that the bodily and the physical represents the most obvious temptation to lead one astray from the pursuit of the intelligible. Thus, the ascetical lifestyle is offered as an antidote to the sensible, but at certain points there is almost an ontological divisiveness between the two which will leave the Areopagite open to accusations of being a Neo-Platonic champion disguised under Christian attire. It will take the brilliant effort of sublimation by Maximus the Confessor to offer such reading of the Corpus Areopagitica which will interpret it as totally Christian enterprise.

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