*Agnosia* and *Henosis* in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

# Abstract

Though the *via negativa* has roots in both Platonic and Christian traditions before Dionysius, it is Dionysius that gives us the most familiar treatment of the subject in his *Mystical Theology.* According to one standard interpretation of the *via negativa*, “the role of negation is first and foremost a corrective measure against any anthropomorphic and even intellectual representations” of God.[[1]](#endnote-1)

While serving as a bulwark against idolatry is certainly important, it is, I contend, secondary. In this essay, I intend to explore the role that the Greek concept of *henosis*, or union, plays in Dionysius’ writings, and specifically, how it relates to unknowing and the *via negativa*. I show that for Pseudo-Dionysius, *agnosia*, or unknowing, is itself a mode of *henosis*. In accordance with principles governing perception and intellection more broadly in Greek thought, that which perceives must be distinct from its object. From this perspective, I show that the reason God is unknown in *agnosia* is not on account of distance, or even on account of a defect in the strength of our intellectual faculties. Rather, it is on account of a defect in the nature of Intellection itself: Intellection presupposes difference, and thus is unable to serve as an appropriate medium for kind of unification with God that *agnosia* describes.

1. Deirdre Carabine, *The unknown God*, (Louvain: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995) 292 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)