

Θεία νόξι:
The Mystical Union as Unknowing
in St. Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

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More predominantly in Eastern Christianity than Western Christianity, there exists a form style of theology called *apophatic*. “Apophatic tradition accentuates the ‘most fundamental’ datum of faith: The essence of God is beyond human knowledge.”¹ While the complementary style of *cataphatic* (*kataphatic*) theology discusses what we *can* know and affirm about God, apophatic theology discusses what we *cannot*, that is, apophatic theology focuses on negation and denial of characteristics of God. Two of the most important writers of apophatic theology are St. Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Both, while using cataphatic theology as well, focus more on the apophatic style, especially in their mysticism. Their mysticism thus focuses more on how much higher than men God is than on how men can come to know God. The question that arises when looking at this mysticism is the possibility of union: can men ever come into union with God when He is so transcendent? More specifically, is the endpoint of the mystical journey for St. Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius a union with God? Each writer will be studied separately in regards to this question, and then their ideas on this question will be compared to see if they share the same teaching.

Before discussing more deeply the mystical theology of these two thinkers, a short digression on the meaning of “mystical union” should be entertained. Many Christians, particularly in the Western tradition, seem to view mystical union solely as something personal, as a union between the Christian and God, and it is described frequently as similar to the relationship between father and child, between friends, or between spouses. Mysticism in itself is not specifically personal, though: as one scholar specializing in mysticism puts it, mysticism is “an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.”² The mystical union, then, is a direct and immediate “experience of some form of union with God, particularly a union

¹ John F. Teahan, “A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition,” *The Journal of Religion*, 58, no. 3 (July 1978), 269.

² Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), xvi.

of absorption of identity in which the individual personality is lost.”³ These definitions describe mysticism across different religious, spiritual, and philosophical spectrums, and thus they may not, in their basic form, completely collaborate with a Christian understanding of mysticism. More particularly, the “absorption of identity” is not complete in most Christian mysticism, unlike in the mysticism of many Oriental religions, in which the individual soul completely dissolves into the divine. Instead, Christian mysticism retains the existence of the individual personality, and the common focus on specifically personal union highlights this. However, the idea of a certain “absorption” into God is still present, more noticeably in the Eastern tradition, in Christian mysticism, and the “direct consciousness of the presence of God” does not have to be solely and strictly personal for it to still be Christian. In short, these two aspects of Christian mysticism, personal union and absorptive union, seem to parallel the two main complementary streams of theology described above: cataphatic (personal, symbolized by “presence”) and apophatic (absorptive, symbolized by “absence”).⁴ An understanding of the legitimacy of *both* these types of mysticism within Christianity is needed for understanding the mystical theology of Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius, since the personal union is only weakly present there, if present at all.

For Gregory, there are two main aspects to mystical theology: the infinite gap between created (man) and uncreated (God) and the doctrine of never-ending progress/perfection. Each of these aspects will be studied, and then the specific question of the possibility of mystical union will be examined in their context.

One writer’s view is that “the gulf between created and uncreated is such for Gregory that there is no possibility of the soul passing across it: there is no ecstasy, in which the soul leaves its

³ Ibid., loc. cit.

⁴ Cf. Ibid., xviii.

nature as created and passes into the uncreated.”⁵ Others, however, hold that Gregory “seems to concede the possibility of man’s attaining, in spite of the divine transcendence, a real apprehension of the unknowable Godhead” and that the transcendence of God “does not, however, mean that there is no contact with God, but merely that this contact is not by way of the understanding but by faith.”⁶ The first question in regards to Gregory’s separation between the created and the uncreated is thus whether there can be *any* true contact between the two.

In many of Gregory’s works, this separation appears. God is, of course, uncreated and infinite: He is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty Itself, He is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and eternal. Man, on the contrary, is created and finite. Though he partakes in the divine nature to some extent by his creation, he also partakes of the nature of beasts, thus lowering him below the angels.⁷ This latter aspect of man’s nature is what Gregory focuses on the most: man is pulled down towards earthly things, so he must expend all his effort to rise above the beastly parts of his nature to the more divine and angelic aspects. The goal of man’s life, then, is to try to free himself as much as possible from the more earthly parts of his nature, those which he shares with the irrational beasts, and to embrace the more divine parts of his nature, those which he shares with the angels. In the end, this process should culminate in union with the incomprehensible God. How can such a union occur, though, a union between finite man and infinite God?

⁵ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79.

⁶ Rosemary Ann Lees, *The Negative Language of the Dionysian School of Mystical Theology: An Approach to the Cloud of Unknowing*, 2 vols. (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1983), I:77; Jean Daniélou, “Introduction,” in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Theology*, ed. and trans. Herbert Musurillo (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 32.

⁷ Cf. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*.

David Balás pinpoints the answer well: “participation in God,” or μετουσία Θεοῦ, in Gregory’s words.⁸ This “participation” involves a partaking of the divine perfections, the virtues of God. “He is all these virtues. We possess them only by participation, and by partaking of them we possess somehow God (or Christ) Himself in us.”⁹ This process of attaining the partaking of God’s perfections is “the foundation and unfolding of the ‘image of God’ in man,” and it can be called succinctly “imitation of the Divine nature.”¹⁰ St. Gregory most distinctly expresses this view in the beginning of his *Life of Moses*: “Certainly whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue.”¹¹ This “moral” or “virtuous” form of the spiritual life definitely has roots in Gregory’s theology. He longs for men to put off their “garments of skin,” all the earthly things that tie them down to earth (among which he counts such things as the passions, the desire for status, marriage, and sexuality itself) in order that they may rise up and attain the nature that is closer to God, the nature God intended in the beginning when He made us in His image. This imitation of nature is then shown in the believer’s actions: as Rowan Williams describes it, “Since ‘intellectual’ knowledge of God is impossible, he must be found and known in the converted heart of the believer and in the purity of his or her life and actions.”¹² In general, this view of participation via virtue and virtuous actions fits in well with this overall theology of Gregory’s. On the other hand, it does not seem to do justice to the Christian faith.

⁸ Cf. David L. Balás, *METOYSIA ΘΕΟΥ: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Studia Anselmiana 55 (Rome: Libreria Herder, 1966).

⁹ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰ Ibid., 161, 153.

¹¹ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), I.7.

¹² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 53; qtd. in Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2007), 129.

Whereas Neo-Platonists saw the One (i.e. God) as the origin and only true Being, Good, and Life, they did not, in general, view It as personal. In the Christian faith, though, God is personal—not only that, but He is *tripersonal*. A Christian spirituality that consists solely in working to attain divine virtue without an actual attempt at personal relationship with the personal God does not seem to do justice to the fullness of the Christian truth. Gregory at least implicitly realizes this, for the idea of participation via virtue is not his only description of union with God. Even in the *Life of Moses*, a work that includes “the perfection of life” in its subtitle, Gregory describes the goal of the Christian life in more personal terms: “We regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.”¹³ “Becoming God’s friend” (τὸ φίλον γενέσθαι Θεῷ) does not seem to be an undue anthropomorphism on Gregory’s part but the true goal of the Christian spiritual life.¹⁴ This is played out all the more in his description of the nuptial relationship between the soul (bride) and the Lord (bridegroom) in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

It seems, then, that for Gregory to have a truly Christian, and not just Neo-Platonic, mystical theology, there needs to be some recognition of the personal nature of God and not just His infinite perfection and virtue. How, though, can this be accomplished, when God is so much higher than man? How does Gregory’s mystical theology reconcile this “absolute distinction, but also gratuitous union, between God and the spiritual creatures”?¹⁵ How can a Christian come into union with an incomprehensible, ineffable God?

One aspect to recall is that Gregory’s theology is not *entirely* apophatic, or else his many theological works would not seem to have a reason to exist. As Weiswurm states:

¹³ Ibid., II.320.

¹⁴ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Περὶ τοῦ βίου Μωσέως*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne. Vol. 44 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1863), 429D.

¹⁵ Balás, 163.

[Gregory] joined his brother Basil in explicitly defending the cognoscibility of the Divine nature, even though it is a very limited knowledge when compared with the infinity of the object...the Bishop of Nyssa never did intend to deny seriously that the Divine essence is in some degree cognoscible. What he denied, and rightly so, is that we can acquire a comprehensive, exhaustive knowledge of God.¹⁶

This knowledge of the divine nature comes from a variety of means for Gregory: some knowledge can be gained from the study of creation,¹⁷ of man's soul,¹⁸ and especially of God's revelation. The main trajectory of knowledge of the divine nature goes "through what is finite and comprehensible to knowledge of the infinite."¹⁹ Gregory even goes so far as to state that "our mind does not first attain God's incomprehensible, invisible nature unless the visible or the flesh is grasped through faith."²⁰ Thus Gregory, even in his mystical texts, does acknowledge that there is *some* knowledge of the nature of God.

Understanding that Gregory admits partial knowledge of the Divine nature, one must ask, how does this fit into his theory of God's absolute transcendence? If God is infinitely higher than man, man cannot reach up and grasp knowledge of Him. Instead, it is through God's *operations* that He is known.²¹ This mention of *operations* is part of a three-fold ontology used by Gregory that can only be summarized here: each *nature* (such as the divine nature) has an intrinsic *power* which is expressed outwardly in *operations*, and it is only through these *operations* that one can come to know some of the character of the *power* and the *nature* from which the *operations* come.²² In the context of this tripartite ontology, one can understand Gregory's claim in the *Commentary* that only through the operations can the divine nature be

¹⁶ Alcuin A. Weiswurm, *The Nature of Human Knowledge According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 160.

¹⁷ Cf. *On the Making of Man* II.1.

¹⁸ Cf. *The Great Catechism* II.

¹⁹ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), XIII, 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XIII, 236.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, XI, 209.

²² Cf. Lewis Ayres, "On Not Three People: The Fundamental Themes of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology as Seen in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods*," in Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 28.

known. An example given is that of Christ's Incarnation in which "that which appeared to us through flesh allowed something of him to be known."²³ It is through operations such as the Incarnation that God's nature can be partially known, but, as it is infinite, it cannot be fully known.

The fact that Gregory accepted at least *some* knowledge of the Divine nature paves the way for a basic mystical theology via knowledge, yet in the end the knowledge must give way. The ineffability and incomprehensibility of God requires that the apophaticism "takes over" the mystical journey to some extent. How, then, can there be a mystical union with God without being able to comprehend His nature in its entirety? How can the Christian even advance in union with God once knowledge can play no role, since "the mind is capable of nothing once in the darkness of the God's presence"?²⁴

The short answer is that the mind, in some sense, plays a role (depending on what is considered part of the mind), but that "the soul's final union with God is effected through a special faculty."²⁵ All mystics agree, according to Weiswurm, that "the mystic vision is something entirely different from discursive, intellectual knowledge," and many mystical writers from Gregory's time and earlier "speak of a mediating faculty at the apex of the epistemological ascent."²⁶ The main question then becomes: what is this mediating faculty? With which aspect of his being does a Christian unite with the Lord?

Two possibilities for this mediating, unifying faculty stand out: faith and desire or love. Gregory speaks of the role of faith in the mystical ascent, stating that God "cannot be laid hold of except for faith," and in the mouth of the bride of the *Song of Songs* he places the words, "having

²³ Gregory, *Commentary*, XIII, 233.

²⁴ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 51-2.

²⁵ Lees, I:151.

²⁶ Weiswurm, 208; Laird, 129.

forsaken every manner of comprehension, I found my beloved by faith.”²⁷ Martin Laird holds that this is the mediating faculty Gregory sees as the key to the mystical union.²⁸ Some textual support, such as the recently-quoted passages, can be found for this view, and it makes sense in terms of Gregory’s theology: if one cannot fully *know* God, how can one come to Him at all except with the *faith* that He is? The Scriptural definition of faith as “the conviction of things not seen” also seems to coincide with Laird’s view.²⁹ Certain statements by Daniélou agree too: “God, as He is in Himself, is Darkness for the intellect, but can be grasped by faith.”³⁰ There is definitely support to be found for Laird’s view of *faith* as the mediating faculty at work in the mystical union according to Gregory, and a truthful scholar could not deny that faith plays a part in this union: however, this does not mean that *desire* does not play a crucial part as well, if not a *more* important role, due to its preponderance throughout Gregory’s work, at least in these two mystical works.

Though in an earlier work,³¹ Gregory wrote that desire is a passion that one must be purified of during his ascent to God, he contradicts this view in the *Commentary*. “The bride sees with pure eyes the ineffable beauty of her spouse and is wounded by a spiritual, fiery shaft of desire. For love which is aroused is called desire.”³² In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory goes so far as to say that the soul is “made for desire.”³³ Throughout these two mystical works, the idea of desire appears again and again, and many commentators pick up on this constant reiteration of *desire*. “It is this desire for union which is the principle of the soul’s entry into darkness, of the highest stage of the mystical ascent.”³⁴ Since the word Gregory uses for *desire* (ἐρως) is also a

²⁷ Gregory, *Commentary*, III, 82; VI, 131.

²⁸ Cf. Laird, op. cit.

²⁹ Heb 11:1 (RSV).

³⁰ Daniélou, 32.

³¹ Cf. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

³² Gregory, *Commentary*, XIII, 234.

³³ Gregory, *Life*, II.226.

³⁴ Louth, 93.

word for *love*, this language is used by many of the commentators as well, such as Louth,³⁵ Weiswurm,³⁶ Lees,³⁷ and Daniélou.³⁸ This love is even a form of knowledge, though one higher than cognitive or intellectual knowledge: instead, it is a type of *experiential* knowledge. As one commentator puts it, “Mystic knowledge of God compares with rational knowledge of God, as the tasting of honey compares with defining it....But even the mystic knowledge of God by no means comprehends His nature.”³⁹

It seems, then, that both *faith* and *desire* (or *love*) play mediating roles in the mystical union according to Gregory. After passing through what she can gain from intellectual knowledge of God gained through His creation and His revelation, the soul “will go and pass on” to the higher, experiential “knowledge” of God gained through the mediating faculties of faith and desire/love while never attaining a complete knowledge of the incomprehensible, infinite, transcendent God: yet a peculiar characteristic of Gregory’s mystical theology is that the soul will “not [cease] to continually pass on by continuing to rise.”⁴⁰ This continual rising is the second major difficulty in conceiving the mystical union in Gregory.

This doctrine of Gregory’s—usually termed “perpetual progress”—comes from St. Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to follow his example: “one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (ἐν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος).⁴¹ Daniélou did much to bring out the importance of this doctrine in understanding Gregory’s work, including popularizing the use of the Greek word *epéktasis*

³⁵ Cf. Louth, 80.

³⁶ Cf. Weiswurm, 214.

³⁷ Cf. Lees, I:68, 82, where she also mentions *faith* as a mediating faculty.

³⁸ Cf. Daniélou, 46.

³⁹ Weiswurm, 213-4; cf. Gregory’s statement “knowledge becomes love,” qtd. in Daniélou, 46.

⁴⁰ Gregory, *Commentary*, VIII, 163; cf. Sgs 4:8.

⁴¹ Phil 3:13 (RSV); GreekBible.com, *The Online Greek Bible*, <http://www.greekbible.com/index.php> (accessed December 8, 2012).

(ἐπέκτασις), drawn from the verb in the Philippians passage, *epekteinómenos* (ἐπεκτεινόμενος).⁴² He translates the term as “tension” or “expansion.”⁴³ Breaking the word down into its components, *epéktasis* is composed of three elements: *epí* (ἐπί)—sometimes shortened in Greek to just *ep’* (ἐπ’)—which means “on,” “above,” or “over” (though Daniélou translates it as “at” or “towards”), *ek* (ἐκ), which means “out of,” and *tásis* (τάσις), which means “stretching,” “tension,” or “intensity.”⁴⁴ Thus, from its constituent elements, a literal definition of *epéktasis* could be “stretching out of and above,” or, in more words, “stretching out of oneself towards what is above.” (Another interesting way to look at this word is in its relation to *éktasis* (ἐκτασις), “ecstasy,” which literally means “stretching out of”: *epéktasis*, with its attachment of *ep’*, “above,” could then be seen as “above ecstasy” or “over ecstasy,” i.e. going beyond the ecstatic state. This is merely an interesting philological speculation, though.)

How then, does Gregory use this Scriptural word? He uses it to describe how “the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher” or how “its present state of goodness...is only the beginning of a more transcendent, better stage.”⁴⁵ In other words, this doctrine means that “the soul which looks to God and conceives that desire for incorruptible beauty always has a new desire for the transcendent, and it is never dulled by satiety. Such a soul never ceases to stretch forth to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead.”⁴⁶ The soul constantly leaves behind all that she has gained in knowledge and experience of God up to her current state and constantly reaches higher to experience more of God (since her knowledge, at least intellectual, discursive knowledge, must stop at some point).

⁴² Cf. Daniélou, 56-59 on the word *epéktasis* itself, and 56-71 for its concept.

⁴³ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁴ Cf. Daniélou, 59.

⁴⁵ Gregory, *Life*, II.225; *Commentary*, VI, 128.

⁴⁶ Gregory, *Commentary*, XII, 223.

The soul's journey never ends but continually progresses with greater and greater desire and greater and greater experience of God.

The difficulty with this view of Gregory's is that it seems like a view filled of despair: how can one truly be united with God when his journey towards God never comes to an end, when he never ceases, having definitively "attained God"? As Weiswurm describes it, "It is the very soul of the mystic desire, to know God and through knowledge possess Him completely. This desire is constantly being frustrated: the mystic never sees God as He is in His nature."⁴⁷ Gregory himself actually tackles this difficulty directly when he comments on the bride's, i.e. the soul's, frustration and despair upon being told by the city guards, i.e. the angels, that "she loves him who is unattainable."⁴⁸ This recognition gives the bride a "veil of despair," until the truth of her mystical journey and union dawns on her: "the veil of despair is removed when the bride learns that the true satisfaction of her desire consists in always progressing in her search and ascent."⁴⁹ What removes the "veil of despair" caused by the fact that she is always progressing towards God is *precisely the fact* that she is always progressing towards God. It is true that she can never fully know God, that she can never comprehend Him in His fullness, but she can always draw closer to Him, and the fact that she is making progress towards Him is what gives her joy. While for the more immature soul this fact causes despair, for the mature soul it is the cause of her joy. The soul's exertion in her upward progress increases her capacity to receive God, and she continually elevates, just as the angels did on Jacob's ladder.⁵⁰ In short, "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by

⁴⁷ Weiswurm, 207.

⁴⁸ Gregory, *Commentary*, XII, 225.

⁴⁹ Ibid., loc. cit. Also: "This despair is merely the adequate expression of the total negation of the intelligence, which is at the same time its supreme act: it is precisely in *accepting* this despair that the soul 'receives in herself the chosen arrow of God in her heart's mortal flesh': Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 107.

⁵⁰ Cf. Gregory, *Life*, II.226-7.

looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied."⁵¹

A synthesis of Gregory's view remains to be completed, along with the solutions to its difficulties. First, Gregory's doctrine of the infinite ineffability, incomprehensibility, and transcendence of God does *not* mean that men can never come to know anything about God or that men can never mystically unite with God. In terms of knowledge, this darkness "implies an awareness of God that transcends all determination, and thus it is far truer than any determined categorical knowledge": it is a knowing by unknowing.⁵² This new, non-discursive, non-intellectual knowledge comes about through the mediation of both *faith* and *love*: the result of this new knowledge is "a sensation or feeling of the presence of God, which God gives to His mystical bride -- a sensation for which there is no rational explanation."⁵³ (One must also remember that this experiential knowledge can only occur because God allows it.) Second, Gregory's doctrine of perpetual progress (*epéktasis*) does not end in despair for the soul, but in joy: after truly understanding it, "the bride is enflamed by a more vehement longing."⁵⁴ The joy comes not from the fact that God will never be fully reached but from the fact that God is always becoming *closer* to the soul. In summary, Gregory "develops a mysticism that knows God beyond knowledge, that feels the presence of God in the darkness of unknowing" where "there is no state of final rest for the soul: it is continually drawn out of itself in its love for God"; it combines a pattern of "light-cloud-darkness" which goes from some "drops" of intellectual knowledge about God to a complete lack of such knowledge, an inability for it to exist, and a pattern of "ever-increasing light," thus "Gregory's theory of divine union should be considered

⁵¹ Ibid., II.239.

⁵² Daniélou, 30.

⁵³ Weiswurm, 212.

⁵⁴ Gregory, *Commentary*, XII, 225.

no less one of light than one of darkness”; Gregory’s theory of mystical union is thus one of λαμπρὸς γνόφος (“luminous darkness”) or Θεία νύξ (“divine night”).⁵⁵

Pseudo-Dionysius’ mystical theology seems more simple than Gregory’s: it seems to only include the first difficulty, that of the incomprehensibility of God, and the first pattern of Gregory’s theory, the pattern of “light-cloud-darkness.”⁵⁶ His radical apophaticism is usually highlighted to the extent that his cataphatic theology is completely ignored. The theological path laid out by Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Mystical Theology* involves both types of theology, and it forms a sort of parabola composed of two parts: descent (*próodos* (πρόοδος), or, in Thomistic Latin, *exitus*), which is cataphatic, and ascent (*epistrophḗ* (ἐπιστροφή) or *anagōgḗ* (ἀναγωγή), or *reditus*), which is apophatic.⁵⁷ This path begins by examining the revelations of Scripture (*Theological Representations*), then the “conceptual names of God” (*The Divine Names*), and then the analogies of God drawn from the sensible world (*Symbolic Theology*).⁵⁸ These all form the cataphatic descent. His two *Hierarchies* (*Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical*), followed by the *Mystical Theology* at the peak, form the apophatic ascent. There is thus definitely *some* knowledge of God in Pseudo-Dionysius’ theology; however, it is undoubtedly true that unknowing, apophaticism, is the peak. Since unknowing is the highest point on the theological path, the mystical union, which is also at the peak of a Christian’s spiritual journey, must be in unknowing. The exact nature of this unknowing union in Pseudo-Dionysius is what must be discussed now.

⁵⁵ Louth, 92-3, 94; cf. Laird, 199; Laird, 203; Lees, I:83; von Balthasar, 103.

⁵⁶ Cf. Laird, 199.

⁵⁷ Cf. McGinn, 163, 171.

⁵⁸ Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* [MT], in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 138-9.

“We must renounce knowing and knowable, every object of thought,” declares Plotinus, a Neo-Platonist considered to be very influential to Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought.⁵⁹ Though knowledge is for Pseudo-Dionysius, as for Gregory, a path to God, it is not the ultimate path. Just as in Gregory, there is a special faculty for Pseudo-Dionysius that allows union with God, *to kreitton* [τὸ κρεῖττον], “the soul’s highest faculty,” a term which, for Pseudo-Dionysius, is a “technical expression denoting a specifically mystical faculty of the human soul.”⁶⁰ A large question with Pseudo-Dionysius is, then, as with Gregory, the question of what constitutes this “mystical faculty.” One somewhat common opinion is that it is a specific, changed form of the intellect: “a transcendent form of intellect” or “*ecstasy of the intellect*,” i.e., intellect assisted by God in order that it may be more closely united with Him.⁶¹ Yet one small passage from Pseudo-Dionysius seems to deny this position: “One is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge” [τῆς πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ].⁶² In order to accept the view of the transcendent intellect, one has to wrestle with this passage first. Lees, for instance, seems to deal with this by declaring the removal of all *discursive* knowledge while still leaving the mystical union as something “essentially intellectual.”⁶³ Other thinkers throughout the centuries, though, have accepted Pseudo-Dionysius at his word in this passage, declaring that there *is* a “passivity of the intellect.”⁶⁴ The general argument is this: God is infinitely transcendent, beyond everything, so high that His greatest mysteries are hidden in a place “beyond unknowing” [ὑπεράγνωστον].⁶⁵ Thus, if He is even beyond unknowing, then there is no

⁵⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.4.9, qtd. in William K. Riordan, *Divine Light: The Theology of Denys the Areopagite* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 100.

⁶⁰ Lees, I:151-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; Riordan, 192.

⁶² Pseudo-Dionysius, 137; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Περὶ μυστική θεολογία*, in Migne, Vol. 3. (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857), 1001A.

⁶³ Cf. Lees, I:153; Lees, I:152.

⁶⁴ Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 107.

⁶⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, 135; Pseudo-Dionysius, *θεολογία*, 997A.

way knowledge could penetrate Him fully. The only way to unite with Him is to leave behind what can never reach Him, which includes the intellect. Thus, the faculty of mystical union must be something other than intellect. The common idea of thinkers of this strain is that this faculty is love, “a love beyond knowledge,” “ecstatic love,” or “an ecstasy of love.”⁶⁶ Even medieval commentators on the *Mystical Theology* agreed with this view, stating that “with the principal affections [one] ascends to see God,” that it is “through the uniting of love” and “by very fervent love.”⁶⁷

Though Pseudo-Dionysius does not mention love in the *Mystical Theology*, he does in other works, particularly in Chapter IV of *The Divine Names*. The word he uses in this place for love is not the typical name used for self-sacrificial love (*ágapē*, ἄγαπη), but the term *érōs* (ἔρως), from which English gets the word “erotic.” It is the word translated as “desire” in Gregory’s *Commentary* and as “yearning” in *The Divine Names*. Pseudo-Dionysius describes it as “a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good.”⁶⁸ Another definition he gives is linked to his concept of *hierarchy*, which is too complex to go into in this paper: “a unifying and co-mingling power which moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, peer to be in communion with peer, and subordinate to return to the superior and the outstanding.”⁶⁹ The last part of this definition connects most with the mystical union, since God is most definitely superior to the soul, and thus the soul, as subordinate, *yearns* to

⁶⁶ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1993), 192; Louth, *Denys*, 106; Louth, *Origins*, 170.

⁶⁷ Thomas Gallus, *Expositio Vercellensis*, in James McEvoy, ed. and trans., *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on De Mystica Theologia*, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 3 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2003), 29, 31; Robert Grosseteste, *Commentary on the Mystical Theology*, in McEvoy, 87.

⁶⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* [DN], in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 81.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

return to God. This *érōs* thus seems to be what the medieval commentators and others describe as the mystical faculty of union in Pseudo-Dionysius.⁷⁰

This mystical journey based on yearning is described, in one passage, as pulling on “a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven”: though men think they are pulling God down towards them, instead they “are being lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.”⁷¹ This passage seems to describe the height of mysticism as enveloped in light, but this is not the end of the mystical journey. The brilliant light of heaven, as in Gregory, gives way to a “ὑπέρφωτον...γνόφον” (beyond-light darkness).⁷² Another phrase used by Pseudo-Dionysius, developed from the story of Moses, for this endpoint is “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας...τὸν ὄντως μυστικὸν).⁷³ This “unknowing” is the key point focused on in Pseudo-Dionysius thought when describing his mystical theology, as seen in the 14th-century English treatise derived from his ideas, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This unknowing is a “knowledge which is much better than intellectual knowledge,” for through “the non-operation of all cognition,” the yearning soul “comes to be united [to God] in his better part, that is, according to the highest part of the power of desiring and loving.”⁷⁴ Sometimes it is claimed that this superintellectual knowledge, for Pseudo-Dionysius, is the ability to praise the Lord worthily.⁷⁵ The main view, though, seems to be that the soul becomes united to God through its superintellectual yearning for Him, a union through perfect passivity that ends in “becoming God,” in divinization, or *théōsis* (θέωσις).⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Even more than just a faculty, Pseudo-Dionysius even describes God as Ἔρως. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, DN, 79-84.

⁷¹ Ibid., 68.

⁷² Lees, I:152.

⁷³ Pseudo-Dionysius, MT, 137; Pseudo-Dionysius, *θεολογίας*, 1001A.

⁷⁴ Gallus, 31; Grosseteste, 85.

⁷⁵ Cf. Louth, *Origins*, 161.

⁷⁶ Cf. Louth, *Denys*, 107; Rorem, 211; Louth, *Origins*, 169-170.

That this union is one beyond intellectual knowledge is made clear by Pseudo-Dionysius' theological path in general and his remarks on the "darkness of unknowing" mentioned above. It is through a complete denial of all theological affirmations about God that men "may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing," that God Who is "beyond assertion and denial."⁷⁷ The truest knowledge of God is "this quite positively complete unknowing" (ἡ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον παντελὴς ἀγνοσία).⁷⁸ God's *radiant* glory is also "divine darkness" because it is "unapproachable" and unknowable, and thus "everyone worthy to know God and to look upon him" can only be present within this "hyperradiant darkness" (or "beyond-light darkness") when "such a one...neither sees him nor knows him."⁷⁹

A summary of Pseudo-Dionysius' theology of the mystical journey and union would thus be as follows: men first must come to know cataphatic theology, the affirmations about God. Once they know these, they recognize that God is higher than them, and so they must deny each affirmation with a negation using apophatic theology. Finally, they realize that God is even higher than these negations, that He is utterly incomprehensible, and that even that word cannot describe Him: the only way to know Him is through accepting one's inability to know Him through ἀγνοσία, unknowing. This entire mystical journey is driven by an ἔρωσ, a yearning, for God. The journey culminates in the believer's being enveloped by God's ὑπέρφωτον γνόφον, His hyperradiant darkness, His glorious incomprehensibility, and through this envelopment achieving θέωσις, divinization. Thus, through prayer characterized by yearning and unknowing, "we may commend ourselves to [God] and be joined to [Him]" (ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἐγχειρίζοντας αὐτῇ καὶ ἐνοῦντας).⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, MT, 138, 141.

⁷⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Letters*, in Pseudo-Dionysius, *Works*, 263; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ἐπιστολαί*, in Migne, Vol. 3, 1065A-B.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 265; cf. Less, I:152.

⁸⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, DN, 69; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων*, in Migne, Vol. 3, 680D.

In conclusion, the theologies of mystical journey and, especially, union in both St. Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite have two fundamental common aspects: the role of ἀγνοσία, unknowing, in allowing the mystical union to take place and the role of ἔρως, yearning or desire or love, in propelling a soul towards this union. God is totally incomprehensible, and men can only reach union with Him through recognizing this and transcending their intellectual knowledge: this is the key theological point on unknowing shared by these two authors. However, the finality of the mystical union is the key difference. Gregory's doctrine of ἐπέκτασις or "perpetual progress" means that the soul's union with God consists in a perpetually incomplete, in a sense, union: the soul is constantly growing closer to God for eternity. This flows from the doctrine of God's absolute incomprehensibility and infinitude: since men cannot know Him completely, the union can never come to a stable end, for there is never a point at which a soul could not know *more* about God. Pseudo-Dionysius, on the other hand, does not write much on the end of the union, only speaking of being enveloped in God, being united to Him, and achieving θέωσις, divinization. The absence of any notion of perpetual progress in Pseudo-Dionysius thus seems to imply that there is a true, stable *finality* in the mystical union, the finality of being divinized through an envelopment into God. This theology seems that it could flow (though this is not explicitly laid out in Pseudo-Dionysius' work) from a recognition not of God's infinitude but of man's finitude: there is a limit to how much the soul can become like God. Thus, while both Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius share the concept of a mystical journey via ἀγνοσία, unknowing, propelled by ἔρως, yearning, that ends in envelopment by God's Θεία νύξ, divine night, or θεῖος γνόφος, divine darkness, the finality of the union is the key difference: for Gregory, there is always a perpetual progress in the union, for "Dove will give place to Dove, and Darkness to Darkness" for eternity, while for Pseudo-

Dionysius, the divinization of the union is an endpoint of the journey, with “the final goal of unknowing union” being reached by the believer’s “renouncing his mind and becoming wholly of God by an ‘inactivity of knowledge.’”⁸¹

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