The Lost Way to the Good

Dionysian Platonism, Shin Buddhism, *and the* Shared Quest to Reconnect a Divided World

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INTRODUCTION

THE GOOD. *THE* GOOD. EVEN THE TITLE OF THIS book may raise hackles or, at least, an eyebrow. Anyone can accept that there is my good, or your good—but things that are good for me may not be so good for you. "The Good," with a capital G, suggests that there is one Good for you and me and everyone. But maybe you don't much like people telling you what's good for you. Maybe you think we should be free to decide on what is good for ourselves.

I can sympathize. To quote Fr Ted of 1990s Irish comedy fame, "I'm a priest, not a fascist: fascists walk around dressed in black telling people what to do." There are noble reasons to be skeptical of strict definitions of goodness imposed from on high. Suspicion against moral authority of any kind, whether Church, state, or family, is widespread. Given the moral failings of all three of those institutions, this is understandable, though I suspect there is rather more to explain the unprecedented extent of today's suspicion: a certain amount of transference and scapegoating, for a start. Those who hate the old authorities are at least as likely to adopt a hectoring and moralizing tone as the targets of their loud and public ire. So, to be clear, while this book is about absolute goodness — about *the* Good — it is not interested in moralizing. It is certainly not about me telling people what is good. It is not even about God telling people what is good. It is about *discovering* the Good: not imposing anything, but unveiling what is already there.

Already there? An incipient, universal goodness, not relative to what is good for me, or you, but a goodness that exists independently? The word "exist" will need a certain amount of nuancing, but broadly, yes. I know it defies what many North Americans and Western Europeans count as common sense. But that common sense, the common sense of only a minority of the population of the world, has only been so for a minority even of that minority's history.

This could now easily descend into a game of cowboys and Indians. I could line up the goodie philosophers and theologians against the baddies and show why the goodies need to win the fight. But the battle lines are readily reversed. The story of heroic frontiersmen turns into the story of beady-eyed genocidal colonists; the story of howling scalp-hunters into the story of victimized noble savages. The moral and spiritual reasoning that motivates one side becomes suspect and the other worthy of uncritical

praise. The nostrum that history is written by the victors places the burden of critical scrutiny on their accounts of affairs, no doubt, but it does not render their accounts entirely untrustworthy or invalid. In reality, the various religious and philosophical traditions of the world have, at some time in their history, been responsible for both good and bad. Christianity has been oppressed and has instigated oppression. Islam, likewise. Dalai Lamas have ordered the destruction of entire villages on a point of Buddhist doctrine, and Zen was used to justify Second World War kamikaze tactics. Atheistic secularism, too, has been used to justify the incarceration, torture, and mass murder of religious people in the Socialist and Communist regimes of the French Revolution, USSR, and China, which continues to "re-educate" Uighur Muslims to this day. Admittedly, I do think those newer regimes are run to a great extent by "baddies," however well-meaning some of them may be, and I hope the reader may forgive me the occasional lapse into invective. But overall, this book is not about goodies and baddies. No amount of point-scoring of one religion against another, or of religion versus secularism, is going to get us back on the path.

That there *is* a path, though, I am in no doubt. It is just that those of us living in the West and, more broadly, countries under Western influence, have largely lost sight of it. It is a path that once reached from Ireland to Beijing, a way that wound carefully around the contours of reality: but Europeans and North Americans wanted faster, more direct routes. We were not content to discover reality. We had to invent reality for ourselves. We cut our own straight and narrow paths, blew our way through the hillsides with split atoms and surgical steel, lined the roads with soaring concrete towers, thought we could pave our way to paradise in a horizontal Babel of information highways. Satisfied with our new infrastructure, we blew up the bridges and cut ourselves off from the rest of the world. We knew better than them.

A popular account of modern Western superiority goes something like this: Once upon a time, we lived in a Dark Age of medieval superstition, hostile to scientific enquiry, with rigid class systems, gender roles, and dogmatic ideology, all imposed by violence on the basis of unsubstantiated articles of faith. Happily, the dawn of the Enlightenment brought scientific advances that have benefitted humanity, driven away the shadows of superstition, and emancipated women and the poor.

There is some truth to this picture — but not as much as often supposed. The Enlightenment has solved many problems, but it has created more. The particular problem I want to focus on is the privatization of truth

and the relegation, on the pretext of reasoned Enlightenment neutrality, of any sense of the common good from the public square.

Ancient and medieval belief in the supernatural Good was not something privately held. It was argued publicly and rationally. Much of the time the nature of reality was disputed with a greater freedom than the popular image of the *Monty Python* Spanish Inquisition might have us suppose, and while the stakes were higher (and hotter) than nowadays, the modern Western academy is hardly in a position to preach to the past about the suppression of unpopular opinions: just ask Jordan Peterson or Germaine Greer. In ancient pagan Greece, the Islamic world, and medieval Christendom, rationally articulated belief in a real, absolute Good actively drove scientific discovery, and this trajectory paved the way to today's technological advances, for both good and ill. The Enlightenment sundering of faith from reason, on the other hand, used empirical, "scientific" methods of observation to justify sexism, racialism, and eugenics to indenture workers and to kill on an unprecedented scale. A misapplication of Darwin's findings would provide the scientific grounding for far more oppressive ideologies than any religion had ever contrived.

There are good reasons to be critical of Enlightenment claims for the objectivity of scientific, empirical reasoning. Its scope is limited by the weakness of our senses, the failures of our powers of observation, and more fundamentally by the bounds of time and space and laws of number within which it must operate. Metaphysical principles are beyond its purview. That said, science is not the "baddie" in this story. I will be critical of our technocratic mindset, but I am not about to don the tie-dyed hemp sackcloth of the eco-warrior and rally us back to the Stone Age. Modern science has been a great boon to humanity, but the same caveats apply to science as to the cowboy. The scientist's perspicacious gaze upon the great vistas of human knowledge has all too often narrowed to the prospector's greedy squint. As someone who relies on an electric-powered machine to sleep at night and looks forward (somewhat tentatively) to a Coronavirus vaccination, I am grateful for Western advances in medicine and biological science. On the other hand, the role of scientific experimentation in the development of the Coronavirus is, to say the least, unclear at time of writing. Its rapid propagation by modern transport technologies is surely undeniable. Evolutionary theory heralded a new age of eugenics and racialism. The splitting of the atom yielded both affordable energy and the most devastating weapons yet contrived, let alone Chernobyl and Fukushima. Motor cars and airplanes have brought the freedom of the sky

and the open road, but they have forced mass movement of labor, thereby breaking up families and neighborhoods, and polluting the earth. A naive faith in science and Enlightenment empiricism is no better than a naive faith in anything else.

Nor will I don the black turtleneck of the French *philosophe* and profess that science is only one narrative among others and does not deserve its privileged claim to truth. Postmodernists and, later, advocates of critical theory have challenged the hegemony of Enlightenment assumptions, and in particular the assumption that the West, whether in its religion, its science, or its modern social mores, is superior to the rest of the world. To that extent I am in sympathy. Where I differ from postmodernists, insofar as I understand their famously and deliberately convoluted prose, is that I see their relativism and unremitting skepticism about all traditionally inherited social norms as the product of exactly the same historic errors of Western thought as the excesses of the Enlightenment they profess to despise. The Enlightenment modernists claim that scientific reason has sole access to universal truth and, despite its historical mistakes at vast environmental and social cost, the solution to the world's ills is to press on with more of the same, and to press it onto all people. They see postmodernists as destructive obscurantists with nothing to replace the society they want to overthrow. The postmodernists and their critical theorist heirs see the modernists as oppressive enforcers abusing their arbitrary and illegitimate power to crush all difference, but stress this difference to such a degree that they leave no room for any commonality. For them, all is multiplicity and difference; truth is to be defined solely by the exercise of power, and justice means seizing that power from the oppressor. Yet both modernists and postmodernists are in common thrall to a myth of inexorable progress: one by the reinforcement of social bonds, the other by their dissolution, and both by means of technologically augmented power. They are well-meaning, and in many cases their intentions overlap: it was, after all, a combination of religious and modernist sensibilities rather than postmodernist theory that led to the emancipation of slaves, votes for women, and the widespread decriminalization of homosexuality, for example. Their means to those ends, however, are limited by an obsession with power that is the peculiarly Western result of rejecting any appeal to a real, transcendent Good.

Neither the optimistic absolutism of the modernist faith in empirical reasoning nor the pessimistic skepticism of postmodernists can offer an escape from the social, environmental, psychological, and spiritual maladies

of our day. This is not to deny that there is something of value to both the Enlightenment and its critics. What both parties need to consider, though, is the incoherence of articulating their values while simultaneously declaring their own position neutral, beyond cultural limitation, and value-free. At face value, the modernist would seem to be the worse culprit in this regard. Nonetheless, both the modernist and postmodernist decry the exceptionalism of their Christian forebears — the dogmatic, unbending, medieval Church — while they seek at least as forcibly to impose their own, single ideological agenda on the world. Those of more postmodern bent are faced with the incoherence of setting targets for diversity of race or gender while forbidding any diversity of thought; of militating for the downfall of consumer capitalism while promoting a consumerist mindset to sexuality and a proprietary approach to one's own body; of decrying the hegemony of Western medicine while treating sexual differentiation by reproductive organs as a problem in need of surgical or pharmaceutical solutions; of eliminating sexual binaries by binarizing body from mind and nature from culture; of arguing that gender and even sex are distinctions with no more than a socially constructed reality while professing support for women's rights; of denouncing all social constructs yet advocating socialism; of castigating imperialism while militating to erase any cultural resistance to their own ideology. The incoherence, in short, of declaring that the default worldview should be that there is no default worldview. If no worldview is ultimately true, then why should anyone believe theirs?

Either way, belief in any reality beyond the material is relativized and relegated to the status of purely private concern: a matter for consenting adults in the freedom of their own homes, as it were. Again, the intention is not bad. Freedoms of conscience and religion are hard-won and deserve protection. There is, however, a shadow side to the privatization of belief. Saying that anyone can believe what they like can easily segue into saying that what other people believe does not really matter. When you then artificially cordon off a section of supposedly inviolable mores and make them exempt from freedom of expression, you make a two-tier system that demarcates acceptable from unacceptable areas of public discourse. In our age of relativism, "unacceptable" is the euphemism of choice for judgmental and hence forbidden words like "bad," "evil," or "wrong." In the bad — sorry, *unacceptable* — old days (because to modernists and postmodernists alike the past is *always* unacceptable), our Christian ancestors used to think they were the ones with the One True Religion and a

God-given mandate to impose it on the world. Their modern, secularist successors like to think that we are over that now: that we have grown out of telling people what to believe and how to think. Unless, that is, we are talking about sex, or race, or rights, or politics, or science, or medicine, or pollution, or trade, or schooling. Modernists and postmodernists alike are quite happy to assert their superior understanding of these matters and to condemn any heretical deviations. You may believe what you like about the existence of the soul in a fetus, as long as you do not bring it to bear in any debate on those areas, such as medicine, science, law, or political discourse. For modernists, these topics have been quarantined from the public square by a supposed democratic consensus. Postmodernists, on the other hand, are justifiably suspicious of the power dynamics at play in establishing such a consensus, but their zeal to eliminate all traditional power structures ends with them promoting a single party line on almost every social issue. There are certain tenets to which we publicly have to subscribe, and our thoughts on these matters, however rationally we advocate them, are privatized into irrelevance. Any cultural resistance to these mores at home or abroad is to be stifled, either because from the modernist perspective those cultures are "medieval" and hence backward or, for the postmodernist, because they are oppressive. And sometimes they are; but the modernist's lack of self-reflection and the postmodernist's obsession with it limit the capacity for either to see the harm being caused by their own positions and impositions.

Whether it is religion, modernist scientism, or postmodern relativism that Westerners seek to impose on the world, our action amounts to exceptionalism and hubris. In each case we are claiming to have exclusive access to the truth, and that exclusivity is the besetting sin of the Occident. It is not that Western Christianity, Western science, and Western postmodern philosophy are without value. Far from it! The problems start when any one of these forgets that it is in itself only one part of a wider and older intellectual tradition, and attempts parricide. This is how fundamentalism is born, whether that of a paper pope or mitered monster, a green-gloved Goebbels or a Twitter tricoteuse. First, books are burnt and, before long, people.

But the West has not always understood itself to be the unique arbiter of acceptable thought. Peter Frankopan's *Silk Roads* books[1] have helped

1 Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017). Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World*, Large print edition (Rearsby, Leicester: WF Howes Ltd, 2019).

remind readers that Europe has taken history's center stage only for the last few hundred years. Before that, Europe was a side-show. The real power was always in the East, flowing up and down the silk roads linking Europe to China. Until our own age of empire, we were subject to the vicissitudes of those old routes of trade and warfare, taking part in both in our own limited ways. The silk roads gave us a connection, albeit tenuous, to the rest of the known world. And what is true of our older economic and political connectivity to the wider world is also true of our intellectual and spiritual landscape. Parallel to the silk roads ran a string of intellectual silk nodes. For at least the first millennium, really until the late Middle Ages, the West was at the far end of a spool of interwoven philosophical threads that stretched all the way to China. The threads of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism were knotted together with a vast range of now much smaller schools and sects. Some of these are remembered in Gerard Russell's *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*.[2] The knots were tied along the line in varying configurations. Loose ends would stick out from time to time and lead to their own unconnected destinations. Most of the threads would be tied off in some places, sometimes to be continued later down the line. But there was a continuity among them, even amid their diversity.

Europe's political and economic hegemony coincides with its sundering of that many-knotted thread. It was to Europe's economic gain that we made empiricism the exclusive arbiter of truth and depended more on the scientific method and the technologies that it produced. These innovations allowed Europeans to propagate their ideas, whether by printing press, carbine, or any of the other engines of empire. They led to advances in medicine which the West enjoys today and has contributed to the world, among other great material goods — though one must admit that we have often exported those goods by the violence of empire or the threat of economic sanction for those who refuse to accept our bounty. In any case, this overemphasis on the material has come at spiritual cost: the loss of the sense that the world has any value beyond its utility to us; the loss of recognition of people, plants, and animals as anything more than resources; the loss of wisdom that led us to believe the definition of reality is ultimately subject only to the most powerful will, whether God's or, in his absence, whoever can develop the most advanced weaponry to seize the most resources.

The thread that had bound Europeans to the rest of the world and to

2 Gerard Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

one another was, in the broadest sense, Platonism. This allowed the West to join in an endeavor, shared from Ireland to Beijing, of articulating not just physical but *metaphysical* reality. Medieval Christian scholars had seen truth in the works of Muslims and Jews, all of whom were working in recognizably the same Platonic framework. For later Western Christians, especially after the Reformation, the idea that any non-Christian might have access to any truth whatsoever became heretical. Even other Christians could be in the dark, whether the Antichrist was seen in the chair of St Peter or the pulpit of the Protestant tabernacle. Later, it was the atheistic revolutionaries who proclaimed themselves the enlightened ones. In short, whoever we were, we alone had the light. The rest of the world was superstitious and wrong. The West deserved to conquer the world's resources, its people, and even its gods.

The Western Church handed its mantle of exceptionalism over to modern Western secularists who increasingly denied the existence of anything beyond the things we could measure, weigh, seize, own, or kill. Now, Christians like me find our old exceptionalism turned against ourselves. In both the modern and postmodern West, among all world religions, Christianity holds a special place of opprobrium as the skeleton in the closet of our wayward past. There is a rather patronizing sense that while Westerners should have grown out of religious superstition by now, its persistence is understandable among less technologically advanced peoples and so, for now, we should humor their proclivities. We quite like our holiday selfies with saffron-robed Thai monks and our garden-center Buddhas, and we are all for the integration of Muslim immigrants, so we pay less attention to the less pacific historical elements of foreign religions than we do to those of our Western Christian forebears. This distaste for Christianity is amplified by guilt about historic missions in Africa, India, and the Far East. The hospitals, schools, sanitation systems, and agricultural methods which the missionaries imported along with their churches are seen in today's skeptical and power-obsessed age as a sweetening of the pill, cynical instruments of conquest, little victories of heart and mind to soften the ground for the cavalry and the concentration camps. This is part of the truth. But the precise nature of some of the less picturesque practices Christianity displaced, the eagerness with which so many Africans, Indians, and Asians adopted Christianity, and the fact of pre-existent, ancient Christian churches dating to long before the arrival of the colonists, are all omitted from this account. Nor is it straightforward to explain how either the modern or postmodern concern for justice, fairness, and the righting

of wrongs could have sprung, pristine, from the wicked old Church if its moral soil was really as barren as all that. It is also naive to suppose that modern aid programs run by governments and NGOs come with no strings attached. Clearly, this is not true when the aid comes from China, an even less religious regime than any of ours in the West. But neither is it true of secular Western nations. We still see ourselves as the world's great liberators. We are either guiding the benighted natives to the glory of Enlightenment values or offering the critical tools Westerners have contrived to wean them off those same values. Western-educated, often white, middle-class liberals and post-liberals alike are telling Africans and Asians to abandon their convictions, including their religion, and are dismissive when they do not comply. And all the while we protest how different we are from our unenlightened Christian sires.

This new hostility towards Christianity in its former Western strongholds is forcing Christians to recognize the problems Western exceptionalism has caused, and perhaps none too soon. This can end up in a newly reactive exceptionalism of our own, as we look to keep our own company and separate ourselves off from a world that does not understand us anymore. But if we take a wider, more historical, view, we will see that we are not as isolated as we imagine. Many other people also seek a return to tradition of some kind. We are so entrenched in divisive categories and identities, so used to seeing the knots of the old rope cut out and neatly boxed away under the labels of "religions," that we have forgotten the common thread that once united us. Divided and conquered, we have lost sight of the fact that religious people by far make up the majority of the world, that we share many common intellectual and spiritual insights, and that together we have a much greater chance of resisting the ongoing atomization of society, obsession with material gain, and relativization of truth claims than any one of us can do alone.

While we may have paved over the lost way, we can still sometimes see it growing up through the cracks of our straight new roads. We have a truly Western tradition lying dormant which does not isolate us from the world, whether by the modernist strategy of pronouncing Western reason normative or by the postmodern strategy of making the denial of any common norms the one true norm. There is an alternative Western past that could yet be an alternative Western future: one that does not cut us off from the wider philosophical and spiritual traditions of the world, but reconnects us with them. A Platonic approach to our historic Christian faith can unite us with ancient religions and philosophies, living and dead, throughout

the world. Platonism offers a once common way of which we have, to the detriment of the whole world, lost sight.

I cannot hope to give an exhaustive account of the interplay of all world religions and philosophies. Even if that were possible in a single book, it is well beyond my competence or wit. There is undoubtedly fruitful work to be done on the comparison between various strands of Platonism and, say, African, native American, or shamanistic metaphysics. Even the multitude of religions and philosophies that stretch from Ireland, via Europe and North Africa, through Central Europe, India, and out to Asia would require far more than a single lifetime to study in depth; and I will be venturing into territory en route which is still fairly new to me. I hope experienced travelers in some of the inner realms will excuse any naivety or oversimplification. One such, my research partner Hasan Spiker, has saved me from several errors in my exploration of the Islamic world, and any that remain are mine alone. My claim to expertise lies at the extreme ends of the trail, and what passes between them makes for a necessary and, I think, illuminating bridge.

In this book you will meet one of the most influential Christian Platonists in the Church, both East and West, who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite. His philosophy is going to guide you down that shared route, following the thread of Platonism as it connects the West with the Church of the East and Islam, and leads us all the way to China. You will see how, even though the thread did not reach Japan, the way it intertwined with Buddhism gives Christian and Japanese Buddhist philosophy enough of a common language to make some mutual sense of the world. Stopping in medieval Kyoto, we will meet Shinran Shonin, founder of the True Pure Land school of Buddhism native to Japan, and see how traditions of the West and East can unite to challenge the relativism and power-obsession of secular modernity, reconnecting us instead to humanity's common and ancient quest for transcendent truth and goodness. We are going to see how a broadly Platonic insight, spread not by the power of empire but by the largely peaceful missionary endeavors of a minority Eastern Church, offers the possibility of mutual intelligibility with Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism and the articulation of a shared, transcendent Good.

The choice of Dionysius and Shinran is not arbitrary. Demonstrating not only a mutual intelligibility but a comparable articulation of a real, metaphysical Good between two religious thinkers from such radically disparate cultures and philosophical backgrounds helps answer objections

from both Enlightenment secular modernists and their relativistic postmodern critics. Challenging the Enlightenment's exclusive commitment to scientific empiricism for the validation of truth claims, Dionysius and Shinran together can take the debate on whether sensory data is really enough to guarantee true knowledge outside its usual and rather stale range of self-referential, intra-Western suppositions. There is enough shared metaphysical ground between them to point towards a real, universal goodness, to a reality beyond empirical knowledge but on which such knowledge relies. Western science alone is not enough to ascertain the fullness of truth. However, the inter-cultural and inter-philosophical nature of the comparison also stands against the postmodernist assertion that there is no commonality, that all is particular and culturally relative. Dionysius and Shinran paint pictures of a universe very different from the Hobbesian war zone of bare matter and conflicting power interests in which the West has come, at least implicitly, to believe. Their pictures have far more in common with one another than either has with a materialistic view of the world, and that commonality belies claims of mere cultural relativism.

Japan's place in these metaphysical questions is paramount. Like the West, Japan has certainly been guilty of exceptionalism. In more recent history, this has been a response to Western colonial threats and an emulation of their behavior. From the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Japan actively absorbed a great deal of technological, scientific, cultural, and philosophical insights from the Enlightenment. What makes Japan unusual in this regard is that it managed this without being colonized and so, more or less, on its own terms. Even the effective colonization of Japan by US forces after the Second World War has not obliterated Japan's deeper cultural and philosophical currents, though it certainly has affected them. The Japanese adoption and mediation of Western thought is unusual, if not unique, in that it is elective rather than coerced. Bringing Japan into our metaphysical deliberations gives us a robust and selective riposte to any Western philosophical exceptionalism. At the same time it subverts postmodern (and at times rather patronizing) expectations of a power imbalance between Enlightenment thought as "white" and colonial, and every other kind of thought from "non-white" nations as necessarily oppressed. Japanese thought does not fit so neatly into that paradigm. The thought of Shinran and his successors shows how traditions of the West and East can unite to call the world back from its decline into relativism and power-obsession, and reconnect us instead to

our common quest for transcendent truth and goodness. I hope this will encourage Westerners not to abandon the canon of Western philosophy, religion, art, and literature, but to give it new life, growth, and fruitfulness by re-grafting it onto the great and ancient vine from which it has been untimely sundered.

At the Areopagus

Some twenty years after his miraculous experience of divine light and conversion to Christ, in the AD 50s, St Paul stepped for the first time onto mainland European soul to proclaim the Gospel.

It is tempting to set this date as the advent of an Eastern religion in the West: the sect of Jews who for less than a decade had been called by the name "Christian."[1] Yet to pretend that Paul's upbringing had been strictly "oriental," to translate the geographical divide of the Bosphorus into a cultural one between East and West, would be an oversimplification. A native of cosmopolitan Tarsus, a city to the north of Cyprus on the east Mediterranean coast in what is now Turkey, Paul was already a man of overlapping identities: a Jew, yes, but also a Roman citizen who had served in the Army. He spoke Latin and Aramaic, but his native tongue, and so his native way of thought, was Greek.

Thanks to Alexander's conquests over three centuries before, Greek was the lingua franca of the now Roman Middle East, part of the greater empire of which Paul was a citizen. Tarsus was ten miles upriver of the Mediterranean and six miles south of the main trade route to Syria and Asia Minor, so Paul would have known the full diversity of the Empire from childhood. He would have seen the people and heard the languages of traders from all over the Empire and beyond, including those who brought in the riches of North Africa and Asia. Whether they came from Gaul or the Ganges, if they wanted to trade, they would need to speak Greek. The language that gave us the very word and concept of "Europe" was spoken far beyond the bounds of that continent. Today's East-West binary would have seemed less obvious to Paul than it does to us nowadays.

The binary of Jew and Greek was likewise blurred. Jews like Paul spoke Greek, thought in Greek, wrote Greek, studied the Scriptures in Greek, even worshipped in Greek. Many Jews lamented this elision of their culture, but more often it seems they enjoyed living with the freedoms it brought.

1 Acts 11:26.

Some feared the Jewish way of life would be diluted to nothing. Maccabees, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Christian Scriptures show that some tried to extricate themselves from the Greek way of life, isolating themselves in communities such as that at Qumran, or like Judas and the Zealots, taking up arms against the Roman oppressors.

Paul's approach was different. As far as he was concerned, the Spirit which had opened the mouths of the Apostles and the ears of their hearers at Pentecost, that the Gospel might be known in the languages of all people, was the same Spirit of light which had opened his eyes and breathed to him the voice of the Lord at Damascus.[2] He had been chosen to play a special part in the Spirit's work. He saw the potential of Christ's person and his Gospel to bring to reality the messianic prophecies of the Jewish scriptures, which foretold the day when people of all nations would gather to worship the one God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Moses. Instead of isolating the Jews from the Greeks, he would make the Greeks into honorary Jews.

So when Paul stepped into Athens in the late 50s he did so not as a stranger, not as a foreigner, but as a fellow citizen of an extraordinarily diverse empire, who spoke the language of the people as his own tongue. An educated and literary man, he spoke not only the utilitarian language of commerce, but was versed in the Greek philosophical and cultural debates of his day. He was well equipped to speak the language of the Greek philosophers in their historic home of Athens. Yes, Paul went first, naturally enough, to his kinsmen, his fellow Jews, to debate with them in their synagogue; but, no stranger to controversy, he then took his conversation into the Agora, as we read in Acts 17:17 onwards.

Generally translated "marketplace," the Agora can have misleading implications for those of us raised with the modern European mindset of a clear division between public and sacred space, or even between mercantile and political realms. We must remember whenever we read texts from the ancient world that secularism is a modern invention. The Agora was where, for centuries, Athenian men had come to spend their mornings in trade, certainly, but also in philosophical conversation, political decision-making and, vitally, in worship of the gods. To them, as to the ancient Jews, it would have seemed perverse to separate such realms. How could anyone trade without political implications, without building or breaking social bonds, relationships, hierarchies of patron and petitioner? And what folly, or worse still hubris, it would be to engage in any such transactions without divine blessing. All these dealings gave birth to and indeed necessitated

2 Acts 9:1–22.

philosophical questions, discussion about what life was for and how it should best be lived. The notion that this should be an arbitrary matter for the individual to decide and that commerce could be undertaken in isolation from social, moral, or spiritual considerations would have seemed absurd; and still less that the government should exist only to lubricate the tracks of such transactions. For leisured men in the Agora there was no division between politics, business, and worship, and they could enjoy relaxed discussion of all these things while their slaves toiled on their estates. Paul was not some isolated street preacher of the modern sandwich-board sort. Speaking in the Agora was part of the Athenians' everyday activity.

Even so, Paul's words drew the attention of the authorities. He was summoned to the ancient law court on the Areopagus, a rocky outcrop to the West of the Acropolis. On this hill named after Ares, God of War, Paul would proclaim the God of Peace.

The irony was at home, for this was where in 399 BC the Greek father of irony was famously sentenced to death. Accused of corrupting the young by teaching disrespect for the gods, Socrates could have avoided his fate. His friend Crito offered to bribe the jailers for his release. It would be just, he pleaded: Socrates was innocent of the charge against him. But Socrates replied, according to the dialogue which bears Crito's name, that justice required him to obey the law, even if it demanded his death.[3]

Socrates placed the law of his city above his own personal interest. For Athenians the law was sacrosanct, as was the Torah for Jews. The Attic analogue for Moses was Solon, the legendary lawgiver supposed to have established the city's rules on the very Areopagus where Socrates was tried, and Paul would be tested 450 years later. It is no coincidence that both Solon's law and those of Moses, Socrates, and Paul, were bequeathed in high places, whether the Areopagus or Sinai. All were seen as divine gifts. By Paul's time, Judaism and Greek wisdom had mingled and supported one another in their convictions. Both were seen as fundamentally in harmony with the laws which, by divine governance, were woven into the cosmos: in the movement of the planets, the laws of mathematics, the very growths and surgings of nature itself.

The essential harmony of divine and natural law was professed by Socrates himself, or at least by Plato's version of him, especially in the dialogue *Gorgias*.[4] By St Paul's time the dominant philosophies in Athens were those

3 *Crito* 50c ff.

4 *Gorgias* 508a: "Gods and men are held together by communion and friendship, by orderliness, temperance, and justice; and that is the reason, my friend, why they call

of the Stoics and the Epicureans. Plato's Academy, insofar as it was still active, was dominated by Cynics, who seem rather like the relativistic Sophists whom Socrates so famously opposed. Even so, all these philosophies worked in the shadow of Plato's work, in varying degrees of sympathy or opposition to his thought. Neither the memory of Socrates nor the philosophical world of Plato were forgotten.

The philosophers called Paul an "idle babbler" and "proclaimer of foreign divinities." It is tempting to read into their words later European sentiments of cultural superiority or even racism, but this would be anachronistic and miss two references. First, the word translated as "idle babbler" (*spermatologos*) in the Greek of Acts refers to someone who, bird-like, picks up the "seeds of words," scraps of ideas and conversations, in the Agora. Socrates was often accused of such babbling, albeit by a different word.[5] More strikingly, the charge of proclaiming new divinities was directly leveled against Socrates, as he attests in Plato's *Apology*.[6] Luke, by whose name we designate the author of both Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, portrays Paul as a new Socrates, challenging the people of Athens as had his predecessor to turn to the natural law of the one God.

There is also a wider cultural point we might easily miss. The word "foreigner" in Greek does not carry the negative connotations we might associate with it in later European contexts. The word *xenos*, which plays a part in the Greco-English compound "xenophobia," means simultaneously *stranger*, *guest*, and *host*. Each of these senses of the word is apposite to the contemporary Greco-Roman attitude towards gods from other lands. For centuries, during the ages of Greek empire the divinities of the Egyptians had been assimilated into the Greek pantheon. Long before, the Pythagoreans who exercised such influence on Plato had reputedly studied the wisdom of the Indian sages. But in Paul's day not only the Egyptian deities, but also

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the whole of this world by the name of order [*kosmos* — a Pythagorean term], not of disorder or dissoluteness."

5 See Socrates' ironic self-reference as a "prattler," *adoleschēs*, in *Republic* 489a and Aristophanes' mocking accusation of the same in *Clouds* 1480 as the "Thinking Shop" is burnt down. *Spermatologos* is a rare word that appears in some fragments of the Pythagorean and in comic poet Epicharmus of Kos, whom Plato is supposed to have admired, but is used rather more literally as a description of the grouse (*Fragments* 56, 59, also quoted in Athenaeus's *Deipnosophists*). The Jewish writer used it in this more metaphorical sense in his *Embassy to Gaius*, written around the early 40s. Presumably it had reached common parlance in this more metaphorical sense by the time Acts was written. Despite the lack of terminological precision, its use fits the general "Socratic" picture Luke is painting of Paul.

6 *Apology* 24b. The same charge is recorded by Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.1.

those of the Celts, Persians, and others besides, while no doubt foreign in their origin, now served as both guests and hosts in the colonized realms of the Roman Empire. Paul's new foreign divinity might therefore expect to be met with interested curiosity, though hostility or derision may follow.

Nor even was Paul's proclamation of monotheism new. The "divinities" whom the philosophers in the Agora assumed he must be preaching about were not "gods" in the Jewish sense of the word "God" at all, but *daimones*, spiritual beings of the lower, created order. Socrates maintained that these existed, but part of the reason he fell into trouble with the law was that he seemed to suggest a single God above and beyond them.[7]

By Paul's day philosophers who did the same no longer suffered Socrates' fate. The Stoics were among those who acknowledged the capricious divinities of the Greek pantheon but insisted that beyond all these was a single God, whom the pagan Epictetus, only a generation after Paul, would address often as "Father."[8] The Stoics maintained that God's divine *Logos*, the principle of reason and order, sustained the universe. The purpose of life was to discern and to live in harmony with that divinely-imbued law of nature. Signaling his sympathy with the Stoics, Paul quotes at them one of their own poets, the fourth-century BC astronomer Aratus, with a line St Augustine would make much of some centuries later: "in Him we live and move and have our being."[9] The reasoning mind that gives the order to the universe in which we dwell is that of the one God from whom both Jews and Greeks originate: for, as Paul continues to quote the poet, "we too are his offspring."

Some five decades after Paul's mission to Athens, the idea of the Logos was firmly established in Christian vocabulary. The Gospel of St John opened by proclaiming that in the person of Christ, the divine Logos or Word "was made flesh." Here John takes the start of Genesis, the primary source of Jewish metaphysical speculation, and translates the Hebrew *dabar*, the "Word" by which God speaks all being into creation, into terminology understandable by those versed in Greek philosophy. Some scholars used to object that John's Gospel, written towards the end of the first century AD, was a sign of the gradual dilution of an originally pure, Jewish gospel into a Greek philosophical idiom.[10] Nowadays more accept — as St Paul's own life and

7 See, e.g., *Apology* 26c, 33c and passim.

8 Epictetus, *Golden Sayings* 1.9; *Discourses* 1.1.3.

9 Augustine, *Sermon* 18; *Confessions* VII.9.

10 See discussion in Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 113 ff. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 1977), chapter XII.

particularly this episode in the Areopagus show — that such a binary is anachronistic. To try to separate the one from the other would be a fool's quest. For almost 400 years the Jews had lived in a Hellenistic culture. Even the earliest Christian literature is couched in Greek ways of thought. Just as a British Jew nowadays is no less British than a British Christian, Paul was native to the Greek culture and spoke the philosophical language of the Stoics and Platonists, not as a second language but as his own.

The Epicureans too would not find the language of Paul's gospel entirely alien. Sometimes atheistic, or at least indifferent to the supposed existence of the gods, the Epicureans are sometimes portrayed as mere hedonists because they made happiness the highest aim in human life, yet the happiness they taught was to be found not in stimulating and sating one's appetites but in taming them. Their word which we translate as "happy" was *makarios*. But there is another place where we translate precisely the same word rather differently. The Beatitudes proclaimed by Christ in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 each begin with *makarioi*, the plural form. To be "happy" is to be "blessed," and English translations of the Bible use both terms.[11] The Epicureans would recognize something of their own thought in a gospel of self-sacrifice and crucifixion of the flesh in the pursuit of that blessed happiness. Nor had they any more time than Paul for the cavorting of the gods of Greek myth or the worship of their idols.

Paul, then, is standing before the council of the Areopagus, the seat of judgment where Socrates had been condemned, a court in which there was no separation of the political from the theological, and where crimes against the gods might be tried as much as crimes against man. He has been brought by sympathetic company to protest against the worshipping of the idols in the city, not as an outsider but as a Greek-speaker; not in fear of condemnation, but as a Roman citizen protected under imperial law.[12] This protection lets him get away with an ambiguous opening gambit. "Athenians," he says, "I see how *deisidaimonesteroi* you are in every way!" This word, typically translated "religious," properly means "fearful of the *daimones*," the spirits or pagan gods. Taken at face value by a loyal polytheist, it would be a compliment. To the more skeptical Stoics and Epicureans, and to any Platonists loyal to the memory of Socrates, the meaning might, rather, be ambivalent. Hidden behind the praise was the accusation of superstition. But

11 "Blessed" prevails in the King James or Authorized Version and its successors, including the Revised and New Revised Standard Versions, whereas the Jerusalem Bible favored in many Catholic parishes prefers "happy."

12 Paul protests to this effect in Acts 16:37.

almost immediately Paul pulls out the barb. Among the plinths of Athens bearing idols to the deities of every aspect of life, of fertility and war, of childbirth and commerce, he has found one that pleases him: the empty plinth dedicated to the "Unknown God."[13]

On Paul's next words rests a tradition of Christian philosophical engagement that flourished in Western Europe until well into the fourteenth century and enjoyed sporadic revivals thereafter to the present day, but which has also exerted an almost unbroken influence on the philosophy and spirituality both of Eastern Christendom and Islam. Rival interpretations of the Apostle's words here are indicative of the great breach between a mainstream philosophical-theological worldview upheld in the West by the Church of the first millennium and the ideas of the late Middle Ages that would in due course lead to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modernity, and so to the sundering of faith from reason.

The Pseudo-Dionysius, one of the most influential theologians of the entire Christian Church, but about whom we have no certain biographical data, would find inspiration in just eight of St Paul's words:

> Ho *oun agnoountes eusebeite, touto ego katangello humin.*
> That which you worship unknowing, I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:23)

A common Protestant reading of this sentence, including that of Karl Barth,[14] is to hear Paul accusing the Greek philosophers of utter ignorance. Without the gospel, he proclaims, you know nothing at all. That is, non-Christian religions are quite simply false, with no truth whatsoever to offer. Worse still, if Barth is to be believed, the closer they seem to Christianity, the more deceptive they really are.[15] Were this really so, we might expect the listeners in the Areopagus to stop listening there and then. But they do not. They keep listening. This is because Paul speaks to them in their own philosophical terms. His use of language is precise: *agnoountes* is a participle, not the adverb "ignorantly," not the noun phrase "in ignorance," but a verbal adjective indicating process: it is, precisely, by the *act of unknowing* that the Athenians give proper honor (which is the meaning of *eusebeite*) to God.

To make the Bible itself the sole vehicle of the knowledge of God seems, on the basis of this passage of Acts, an unbiblical assertion. Rather, there is a proper acknowledgement of the limits of our knowledge of the God

13 Acts 17:23.

14 *Church Dogmatics* ii/1. 121 ff.

15 *Church Dogmatics* i/2, 340–42.

whom the Jewish Scripture themselves proclaim unknowable, which leads, paradoxically, to true knowledge of Him; and at least to some extent, this (un)knowledge is accessible in philosophies that lack the full revelation of God in Christ. Socrates is supposed to have said that he who is wisest is the one who knows he knows nothing.[16] It is not at any allegation of ignorance that the wise Greeks scoff. No, they reserve their censure until Paul professes something they really cannot believe: the promise of physical resurrection, and of final judgment by a mere man. For all their wisdom, as St Augustine would later observe, even the Platonists among the pagan philosophers would never accept that the Word could be made flesh.[17]

Still, not all the philosophers scoff at Paul. Some want to hear more. It is hard to see that any would have wanted to do so had Paul not spoken their language, both literally and metaphorically, or had he ridiculed them. He went out not to those whom he knew would be unsympathetic, not into some anachronistically secularized and hostile public square, but strategically, deliberately, to the Agora, a philosophically and spiritually active place where he thought he would meet people who spoke enough of the same language to hear and understand what he had to say. He did so from within the synagogue, from within his own community, but went out to find allies where he could, and if possible to bring them with him.

Even those who could not assent to the ultimate conclusions of Christian revelation became more sympathetic with him. Others went all the way: they crossed over and were baptized into the Church. Among these was Dionysius the Areopagite. Five centuries later he would provide the pen name for a theologian of almost unparalleled influence, who would follow Paul in working in both Christian and Jewish traditions and take the motif of divine unknowing to such an extreme that we do not even know who he was himself. And although his influence waned in the second millennium in the West, his more Eastern strand of Platonism was kept alive among the churches of the East, whose long history of minority, persecution, and proximity to non-Christian believers gave them no choice but to seek the truth with, rather than in isolation from, others who also seek truth. As we will see, the Pythagorean and theurgic principles that informed this

16 *Apology* 23a.

17 Augustine, in *Confessions* 7.9.13, as in the *City of God*, Chapter 8, praises the Platonists as those holding the closest philosophy to Christian revelation, but identifies their failure to acknowledge the Incarnation as their fatal shortcoming. Exactly which "Platonists" he has in mind is disputed, but in general terms he seems to have been influenced more by the more intellective school of Plotinus and Porphyry than by the liturgical or "theurgic" teachings of Iamblichus that would inform Pseudo-Dionysius, as we will see.

Pseudo-Dionysius continued on in the living traditions of Islamic Sufi practice and of Middle Eastern minority religions. The path they trace along the silk roads makes for comprehensible conversations with further Eastern philosophies to this day.

The question for modern Western Christians is whether to make allies of these people and learn from them or, in the spirit of Western exceptionalism, remain complicit in the ongoing and almost complete deconsecration of the public square.

St Paul's answer to that question is clear: an answer that some five centuries later would be taken up by the shadowy figure who took the name of his first Greek disciple.

WHOEVER HE WAS...

For centuries it was widely believed that the theologian who wrote as Dionysius the Areopagite really was the Athenian philosopher who had followed Paul. As late as the thirteenth century St Thomas Aquinas seemed to think so.[18] Seeing Dionysius as only one generation removed from Apostles themselves, he treats the writings ascribed to him as second only to the Scriptures, citing them more than Augustine, more even than his beloved Aristotle, whom the medieval Schoolmen admired enough to call simply *the* Philosopher. Yet doubts had been cast on Dionysius's authorship far earlier, even as his writings emerged on the Christian theological scene in the sixth century. By the time of the Reformation his identity was so suspect that Luther could dismiss "that Dionysius, whoever he was" as *plus platonizans quam christianizans*: "more Platonist than Christian."

By the Middle Ages, the Greek language had become almost extinct in the Western Church (Eriugena and some of his fellow monks in Ireland were the exception). What originally Greek philosophical texts were still circulated were now read in Latin translations. It was only with the Christian reconquest of Andalusia in 1053 that the great library of Toledo yielded the treasures of classical antiquity preserved there by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars for the three hundred years of the Umayyad rule in Spain. The monoglot monks of the West had toiled on both classical and biblical texts with great skill, ingenuity, and deeply prayerful engagement, a point missed by those who still entertain the fiction of a European "Dark Age."[19] But even so, the monks' scope could not rival the multilingual tradition of

18 Aquinas, *In Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, 2 d. 10 q. 1 a. 2 co, describes Dionysius explicitly as the "disciple of Paul."

19 For a popular dismissal of the "Dark Age" myth, see Seb Falk, *The Light Ages* (London: Penguin, 2020).

the Islamic world. Islamic universities continued to study and preserve the Greek texts lost to Christendom. This gave the opportunity for scholars of all three Abrahamic faiths to comment on and develop them in Hebrew, Greek and Arabic.

By Luther's day, more European scholars were able to read Greek and Hebrew texts in the original. It gradually became more obvious that Dionysius had relied on some of the pagan Neoplatonic philosophers whose texts were now better known, quoting some of their passages word for word: in particular, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus. Plotinus had lived in the third century, Iamblichus the third to fourth, and Proclus the fifth. "Dionysius" could not have lived in the first century, unless one rather perversely insisted (as some did) that those three pagan philosophers were actually quoting him. This seemed unlikely, to say the least, given that nobody mentioned him until the first half of the sixth century.[20]

So was Dionysius, as Luther suggested, trying to claim for himself a pseudo-apostolic authority for corrupting the pure gospel with alien, Platonic ideas? Or worse, as some modern scholars have suggested, was he a coward and heretic hiding behind the name to protect himself from orthodox authorities?[21]

Dionysius was undoubtedly a Platonist, and among his pagan peers pseudonymity was an established practice. The Syrian Iamblichus wrote under the Egyptian pseudonym of Abamon, not as some cunning disguise but to place himself in the line of Pythagoras and Plato, who were said to have been influenced by Egyptian, as well as Indian, wisdom.[22] Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis* was an important work to Dionysius, who developed from it his own distinctively Christian sacramental theology, as we will see in the next chapter. So, first, Dionysius's adoption of the pseudonym can be seen as a nod to Iamblichus and an assertion of his role in the universal philosophical quest for truth in which the Platonists claimed their part.

Pseudonymity, though, was also practiced in Christian circles. Take the New Testament: we know that several of the letters bearing St Paul's name were not written by him. The authorship of the Johannine corpus — the Gospel, Letters, and Revelation bearing John's name — is highly disputed, and part of that dispute at least revolves around modern, individualistic assumptions of authorship and testimony that do not readily map onto

20 See e.g., Sarah Klitenic, "Theurgy in Proclus and Dionysius," *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society* 90 (2001): 85–95.

21 For an example of this tendency, see Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist*, 126.

22 *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis*, ed. Emma Clarke, John Dillon, and Jackson Hershbell (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), xxxiii.

such ancient territory.[23] Scholars do not generally think that the pseudonymous writers in the New Testament were frauds trying to claim apostolic authority for themselves. Say the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews did write it in pursuit of his own glory: why, then, would he have let his work, one of beauty and theological sophistication, be ascribed to somebody else? To write in a great saint's name was not to plagiarize, to accrue to oneself their honor or pull the wool over the reader's eyes, but to honor the saint by one's words. It was also an act of humility, since the actual authors of those texts were, and remain, unknown. In this spirit, writes emeritus Pope Benedict, Dionysius "did not want to glorify his own name . . . but rather truly to serve the Gospel, to create an ecclesial theology, neither individual nor based on himself."[24] As Dionysius himself writes, "Paul the Great, in a possession of the divine love and having participated in its ecstatic power, says with inspired lips, 'I live no longer, but Christ lives in me.'"[25] Like Paul and like the Baptist, Dionysius diminished that Christ might grow.

Already we see that there is more to Dionysius's pseudonymity than mere pseudery. His adoption of the ancient saint's name is a practice consistent with both Christian and Platonic traditions. But that is not all. It is also a corollary of his specific theological approach to God by mystical unknowing. Dionysius's pseudonymity calls us to a particular way of relating to God.

The Areopagite's writings are most famous for what is called their *apophatic* method of apprehending the divine, later known in the Latin tradition as the *via negativa* or "negative way." Where the *cataphatic* spirituality of the "positive way" focuses on what can be said and known of God, the apophatic way is to "know" God by knowing his unknowability: to recognize that anything we say or understand about the unknowable One is ultimately untrue. The distinction between the apophatic and cataphatic ways can certainly be discerned in Scripture, even if not in such categorical terms. God reveals himself, paradoxically, as unknowable, saying for example to Isaiah, "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."[26] He reveals himself to Moses only in the midst of a dark cloud, prompting Moses to avert his eyes and warning him in those words St John will later recall, "there shall

23 See the discussion in chapters 14ff. of Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006).

24 Benedict XVI, *The Fathers*, Vol. II (Huntingdon, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009), 40.

25 *Divine Names* IV.13.

26 Isaiah 55:8.

no man see me, and live."[27] Dionysius's master Paul stresses the same in his first letter to Timothy.[28] There is a strong tradition of God's invisibility and unknowability. And yet God does reveal himself, in the images of Scripture, in the fire as much as the cloud, in the very cosmos that sings his praise, in the rites of his Temple,[29] and decisively in the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture confronts us with a paradoxical revelation whereby God is revealed as hidden, and knowable as unknowable. Beyond Scripture, though, ancient pagan philosophers had intuited the same paradox. Among the Platonists it was Iamblichus who crystallized the apophatic-cataphatic distinction.[30] Apophatically speaking, God had to be transcendent, beyond everything; nonetheless, as origin and cause of everything, He had some relationship to everything in which He could cataphatically be discerned. Platonic philosophy would help Christian theologians interpret the witness of Scripture.

Dionysius was far from alone in advocating the apophatic way: it was shared by many earlier Fathers of the Eastern tradition, such as St Gregory of Nyssa and Origen. In the East, apophatic spirituality would become practically universal, epitomized by the Hesychast tradition of silent meditation. In the West, similar emphases in the thought of St Augustine are enjoying reappraisal,[31] and Latin translations of Dionysius would inspire the spiritual teaching of Eriugena, the Victorines, St John of the Cross, St Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhardt, the Carthusians and many others. Nonetheless, in the second millennium, more cataphatic spiritual systems would dominate, including those of later Franciscans, of St Ignatius of Loyola, and of the magisterial Reformation often referred to nowadays as "mainline Protestant." In the Church of England, the more apophatic, Platonic theology persisted in the theology of the seventeenth-century Anglican Caroline divines and eighteenth-century Cambridge Platonists. It enjoyed a further revival in

27 Exod 33:20; John 1:18, 5:37; 1 John 6:46.

28 1 Tim 6:16.

29 There is a fascinating discussion on the knowledge and vision of God in the Temple tradition and later rabbinical attempts at eliminating that tradition from the biblical texts in Margaret Barker, *Temple Mysticism: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2011).

30 As related by the Platonist Damascius, *De Principiis* II, 1.4–16.19.

31 Willemien Otten, "In The Shadow Of The Divine: Negative Theology And Negative Anthropology In Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena," *The Heythrop Journal* 40, no. 4 (1999): 438–55. A synthesis with Augustine, generally taken as a representative of the more Porphyrean intellectualist strand of Platonism, taken together with the more Proclean, theurgic strand to which I am drawing attention, can be found in John Milbank, "Intensities," *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 445–97. The synthesis is, however, resisted in Wayne J. Hankey, "One Hundred Years of Platonism," in *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*, ed. Jean-Marc Narbonne (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 97–248.

the theology of the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement.[32] Still, among the majority of philosophers, Platonism was tarred by its association with Descartes and treated with contempt.[33] From the late medieval period onward, the apophatic way was sidelined to monks, nuns and poets, and regarded with some skepticism as a reputable philosophical position.

This is not to say that Dionysius excludes a cataphatic approach to God. Certainly, if we think that we can reach God by our own standards and the evidence of our senses, we are led astray; but this is not to say we cannot think or say anything at all about God. We can know God in all things, including in ourselves. All things come from God as their originating cause and are, in a Platonic sense, unfoldings of the One. So absolutely everything "says" something about God that we can name and understand. Dionysius inherits from the Platonic strand of Iamblichus and Proclus an understanding of the creative tension between the apophatic and cataphatic ways of discerning God, divine hiddenness, and revelation — and with it, we will see, an affirmation of the inherent value of the created world.

While our concepts about God are ultimately untrue, some are less untrue than others. Were this not so, Dionysius could not have devoted an entire treatise to the topic of the *Divine Names*, the highest and least inappropriate of which is the Good. Nonetheless, we must ultimately negate this along with every positive statement we make of God. The positive way must be tempered with the recognition that God is also absolutely transcendent, beyond all things. This is where the apophatic way comes in. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so God's ways are higher than our ways, his thoughts than our thoughts.[34] It is not just that God's goodness is so good as to be beyond any goodness we are capable of imagining, that we are lower beings in a chain of existence and so cannot grasp him in the same way an ape cannot grasp astrophysics. This is not enough. God is so entirely beyond being that he is beyond intelligibility altogether, as a matter of metaphysical truth. It is too much even to say what we cannot know of God, or to describe God by what he is not. Dionysius wants us to negate even such negations of God, stripping away the delusion that our feeble reasoning can aspire to the folly of divine wisdom. Only in dumbness can

32 George Westhaver, "Mysticism and Sacramentalism in the Oxford Movement," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Oxford Movement*, ed. Stewart J. Brown, Peter Nockles, and James Pereiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

33 Peter Harrison, "Laws of Nature in Seventeenth-Century England from Cambridge Platonism to Newtonianism," in *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature*, ed. Eric Watkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127–48.

34 Isaiah 55:9.

we be joined with that Word whom words cannot describe, and attain to the knowledge which passes all understanding. True to Iamblichus's tradition, Dionysius brings the cataphatic and apophatic approaches together. God is both all things in all things, and nothing in anything;[35] knowable in all things, and unknowable in any of them. To explain the relationship between these two approaches we can follow Dionysius and Plotinus's precedents and apply the metaphor of a sculptor:[36]

> We pray to enter the darkness beyond light: to see through unseeing that which is beyond sight, to know through unknowing that which is beyond knowledge, even by not seeing, by not knowing. For this is to see and to know truly, and in a way beyond being to hymn that which is beyond being — through the carving away of all beings, just as the makers of natural[37] statues carve out all the obstacles which prevent the clear sight of that which is hidden and, simply by carving away, bring to light the beauty which had been hidden away.

Take a rough block of marble. Looking at its shape and size, you form a plan in your mind for the statue which will emerge from it. At this stage, the idea of the statue is its only reality, unless you want to argue that thoughts are not real. A modern materialist might see the mental plan as less real than the final product. The Platonist would argue conversely: at this stage, the thought of the statue, that plan in your mind's eye, is its only reality. It is far more real in your mind than it is in the block of uncarved marble in front of you. The thought is, moreover, real — whether I make the statue or not.

Now, the statue in your mind is a thing of great beauty. So, it is beautiful even before it is made. You know that it is beautiful even though you have not seen it. This is because you have a sense of what constitutes beauty in your mind already. Yet, however strong your sense of beauty may be, you cannot picture Beauty itself. It is an invisible, abstract idea in which beautiful things share, but it is no less intelligible or real than they are. The materialist would say that we derive the idea of Beauty from the evidence

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35 Plotinus *Ennead* 5.2.1; Proclus, *Elements of Theology* prop. 142; *Divine Names* 7.3.

36 *Mystical Theology* 2; Plotinus *Ennead* 1.6.9.

37 "Natural": the Greek, *autophues*, is a difficult word to translate. Parker and Luibheid leave it out altogether. Iamblichus uses it to describe a "spontaneous" knowledge of the gods, beyond logic and reason, as they turn us towards the Good in prayer (*De Mysteriis* 47:13–15). The making of statues of the divinities is one such form of prayer, as discussed in Gregory Shaw, "The Chôra of the Timaeus and Iamblichean Theurgy," *Horizons: Seoul Journal of Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2012): 103–29.

of our senses, because only the physical world is real: there is no reality that is not material. The Platonist, conversely, would argue that Beauty itself is prior to and so more real than any actual beautiful thing. Nor is its reality confined to the mind of the observer. It is more real even than any beautiful idea in our minds, such as the plan we have for our sculpture.

The notion that Beauty is more real than beautiful things may seem an odd proposition to moderns, with minds entrenched in materialist presuppositions. Yet it follows the same logic as the relationship between your imaginary sculpture and the solid block of marble. The imaginary sculpture is more real than the marble sculpture at this stage. The marble will share the pattern you have in your mind, and indeed several more blocks of marble might share the same pattern, if you happen to have many of marble blocks and plenty of time. They will eventually participate, as Platonists would put it, in your idea of the sculpture. Furthermore, that idea itself participates in higher ideas still: just as those several blocks will participate in your idea of the sculpture, so your idea of the sculpture participates in a higher, unifying idea: the idea of Beauty. Your mental sculpture is not the only beautiful idea in existence. What it has in common with all the other beautiful ideas and beautiful things is its participation in the idea of Beauty. That idea is therefore real, and like the mental statue it is real whether or not any actual beautiful ideas or things come into existence.

Platonists do not stop with the assertion that ideas are as real as physical things: they say that in fact the ideas are *more* real. Physical and even mental representations are only reflections of the universal realities beyond, flickering like the shadows on the wall of Plato's famous cave. Perhaps you are a great sculptor. But even if you are a new Michelangelo, your statue will never reach the perfection of your mental image of it. What artist is ever completely satisfied with his or her work? Even if you were Leonardo da Vinci reborn, you could not draw an absolutely perfect square or circle: the perfect square, the perfect circle, or the perfect statue can exist only in abstraction. Even a Malevich, Mondrian, or Rothko square will only participate more or less in the idea of the square. It will not be a perfect square. Likewise in the plastic arts, a statue you make will bear more or less of a relation to the beautiful idea you had, depending on your skill as a sculptor. That is, it will participate more or less in the idea of the statue. Yet however perfectly our concept might accord to the idea of the statue, even Michelangelo's *David* is base and ugly in comparison with the idea of Beauty itself. Beauty is more beautiful, and hence truer, than any of its instantiations.

What is more, the ideas are more lasting. A statue carved in stone, even in marble, will not last forever. It will deteriorate. Still more so and more quickly, will the beauty of a beautiful person. These things change and die. Yet beauty itself is imperishable. Its reality is not only purer than any physical instantiation, but eternal. The implication of resisting the reality of such invisible and perfect forms is that it reduces existence to nothing but sheer multiplicity, which is to say in the end nothing but a mentally imposed construct unites, say, one tree with another, or more problematic still, one human with another. There is no real human nature, only an agreed code which we, as language-using animals, choose to designate things that seem similar but are ultimately absolutely different. Language, on this view, becomes the rules of a mental game, and the physical realm its board and pieces.

Dionysius does not spell all this out in his analogy. He shifted its focus from the image we want to carve to the marble we are carving away. In carving, we do not build up an image from nothing. We create by stripping away, which Dionysius calls *aphaeresis*. The block, with all its veins and granulations, its texture and shape, suggests a statue to us. Perhaps we see in a certain block the shape of an arm or head, or note in its hue some redolence of human character. An image begins to develop in our minds. This corresponds to the cataphatic affirmations about God. What we perceive tells us something of him. It also resonates with the Buddhist teaching of Buddha-nature and its outworking in traditional schools of woodcarving, where images of reality's true, internal nature as nondual with Buddha are brought out of the wood by working with its natural grains, twists, and shapes rather than imposing an image onto it.[38]

Once we have discerned the image, we must chisel away everything that occludes it. From the outset, the act of carving is not meant to impose our will on the marble, or to create something we have uniquely conceived. The matter has suggested the form. So, we cut away all that is not beautiful, carve away the imperfections, smooth it down, until all that remains is the closest approximation to the beautiful idea we had in mind. Yet the beauty was always there, latent, before it entered our conscious mind. We might say that the capacity to recognize beauty is part of the original architecture of our mind, and that the beauty it recognizes is an essential part of the original architecture of the universe. Like reflects like. Order and harmony are constitutive elements of human memory rather than arbitrary impositions upon it, as much a part of the formatting of the mind as of everything else

38 See some examples of the tradition at work today and find out more about the philosophy behind it at https://www.carvingthedivine.com.

in existence. The alternative position, which would render the mind a blank slate, ignores the question which, as the German-American theologian Paul Tillich points out, "empiricism never can answer, namely, the question of the structural presuppositions of experience."[39] In Dionysius's analogy of carving, we do not impose anything on the marble; rather, we bring its latent beauty to light. It is a recognition that, in the words of Professor Douglas Hedley, Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism, "we are forged of the same stuff as all other creatures and, as such, share the similitude of the created order with the author of all things."[40]

Yet as we carve, we come to realize that the idea we had was imperfect. We try to bring out the shape and contours of this beautiful image we have glimpsed through the stone, but it is never quite right. We cannot capture it. It is difficult enough even if we are trying to carve only a mortal subject, say a beautiful person, but if we are trying to carve Beauty itself, and thereby to carve God, we will keep carving and carving and carving — until there is nothing left at all. The marble is every concept of God that we have; the chisel, our recognition that each of these concepts is related in metaphors to material, created things, and is therefore ultimately untrue of God, who is beyond them. And in the end the statue is no idol, but the Unknown God who reveals himself in the divine darkness Moses found on Sinai and St Paul on the empty plinth in Athens.

The emptiness of the plinth is essential to Dionysius's understanding of God. Only by unknowing can we attain to the knowledge of God: but to unknow, we must first know. We must look and see and name and then systematically carve away all the images, negate all the words and names we use of God. We must negate even the negations. The physical world gives us, cataphatically, the very images of God which, apophatically, we must cut away. Affirmation and denial are equally necessary. A purely cataphatic model over-identifies God with creation and leads to pantheism, the domestication of the transcendent to the material sphere; a purely apophatic model denies any continuity whatsoever between God and creation, and removes any basis for knowledge beyond the merely experiential and empirical. Dionysius's move to preserve both the immanence and transcendence of God, and both his knowability and unknowability, is just as Christian as it is Platonic. In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius describes the great paradox of the Divine Fullness of God self-emptying into Christ, and yet remaining unaffected in its eternal plenitude:

39 Paul Tillich, *Philosophical Writings* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1989), 384.
40 *The Iconic Imagination*, 35.

> So, since for the sake of the love of humanity (*philanthrōpia*) the Beyond Divine has come all the way to the natural realm, and truly come into existence, and taken the name of man (may the Divine be gracious towards such matters beyond mind and word which we are hymning!), the one who is beyond nature and beyond being therefore shares in these things: not just because he has entered communion with us without alteration or confusion, and without suffering any effect on his superplenitude by this unutterable act of self-emptying (*kenōsis*), but also because this newest of all new things was supernatural *in* our natural characteristics, beyond being *in* things of being — transcending all things which belong to us, all things which derive from us, all things which are beyond us. [41]

Here, Dionysius offers a commentary on that profound meditation on the nature of Christ in St Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:5–11, where Jesus is described as "emptying himself of divine glory." Biblical scholars broadly agree that in this letter, one of the first and therefore one of the earliest parts of the New Testament, written before any of Gospels, Paul is citing a hymn already well-known to his Christian correspondents. So, the divine act of "self-emptying," or *kenosis* in Paul's and Dionysius's Greek, comprises one of the earliest Christian understandings of who Christ is and how God works in him.

But why does God empty himself in this way? At this question, Dionysius the Christian departs from much pagan Platonic precedent. For while Plotinus would heartily agree that created beings are drawn to God by their desire or love for him, he could not have accepted Dionysius's conclusion that God is drawn out of himself because of his love for us. It is, for Dionysius, only because God is love that he empties himself at all: first, in the ongoing act of creation, but then in the Incarnation of Christ, and conclusively in the Crucifixion.

From our time-bound perspective, these may appear to be three separate "events" in chronological sequence, but for Dionysius, they are aspects of the sole outpouring of grace that constitutes not only an action of God, but God's very nature. It is not just that self-emptying for the sake of love is something God does: it is what God is. As the prologue of St John's Gospel expounds, the divine Logos or Word by which God gives shape and order to creation is not something separate from and subordinate to God, but is with God and is God. We can conceptually distinguish the Logos as the "mind" of God from God the Father, but to posit the separation of God

41 *Divine Names* II.10.

from his mind, his Logos, is nonsensical. As God, the Divine Logos entirely transcends creation, both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. That is to say, the Logos, there "in the beginning," is beyond time. And yet it is this selfsame Logos which is Incarnate in time as Christ, and manifests the same, self-emptying "philanthropic" love. It is out of God's *philanthrōpia*, his love for humanity, that Christ, the Divine Logos, comes down and takes on himself our nature.[42] Plato had attributed such "philanthropy" to Socrates, and Iamblichus later thought it a great virtue in political leaders,[43] but it was Paul who applied this quality to God himself in his Epistle to Titus, "when the kindness and *philanthrōpia* of God our Savior shone forth" for our salvation.[44] Building on these biblical and Platonic foundations, Dionysius speaks of the entire divine hierarchy by which reality is ordered as "philanthropic." Christ's Incarnation is the realization in time of God's eternal, unchanging, transcendent yearning to draw the created order into the uncreated heart of his divine love.

As he does so, pulling the world into his own self-emptying, he does not however compromise the integrity of creation. The self-emptying of God into which all being is called is not a destructive act, not an emptying out to a nihilistic nothingness. Rather, it is the realization that any given being, including humans, have no existence at all except in relationship to one another and to God. In their own right, all things are already empty. It is only in relationship that they can be said to have any existence at all, and in this, they are reflections of the Trinitarian God who by nature is mutually self-emptying relationship. God empties himself through creation, not despite it, and in doing so brings it to its fullest being and value. "It does not belong to providence to destroy nature,"[45] writes the Areopagite, a sentiment on which six hundred years later St Thomas Aquinas would beautifully build his memorable maxim, *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*: "grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it."[46]

It is in the Divine Word emptying himself of glory for the sake of love that all things are bequeathed their truest nature and the possibility of

42 Despite later scholars' attempts to paint Dionysius as basically a Platonist with a slight Christian veneer, the philanthropic love of God is not an isolated theme in the Dionysius Corpus, in which it appears 31 times. See especially Epistle 4, where Dionysius designates *philanthrōpia* Jesus's predominant characteristic.

43 The reference can be found in a letter of Iamblichus preserved by Johannes Stobaeus (III, 3, 26).

44 Titus 3:4.

45 *Divine Names* 4.33.

46 *Summa Theologiae* I. I.8 ad 2.

perfection. For humans, this means becoming saints. So, while the empty plinth is a metaphor for Dionysius's pseudonymity, his self-negation by the taking of another name also reveals a deeper aspect of the spiritual path to which he calls us down today.

Abbot Christopher Jamison's popular book, *Finding Happiness*, proclaims self-reflection the very first of his *Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life*.[47] He tells an ancient story of the desert fathers, in which three friends set out in the service of Christ. The first seeks to serve as a doctor, the second as a broker of peace between warring tribes, the third as a hermit. After some years the first two, burnt out by their work and seeing there will be no end of the sick to cure or wars to end, seek out their third friend for advice. He listens to them in silence, then takes down the water skin from its hook in his tent. He pours water into a bowl and asks them what they can see. Swirling and full of sand, at first the water reveals nothing, but when it settles they can see their own reflections clearly. The message is that in our busyness, the relentless swirling activity of our lives, we are blind to our true reflection. Unless we make time to rest and to examine ourselves with honesty and clarity, we are unable to see how ravaged we are by sin.

Like the Benedictine Abbot, the Areopagite calls us on a journey of personal holiness too, but the self-reflection he advocates goes much further than recognizing our moral flaws. As we contemplate our image in the clear water, we must recognize not only our deficiencies but our absolute inability to resolve them. For Dionysius, as a student of Paul, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men."[48] Human wisdom falls so far short of the perfect wisdom of God that we cannot reach true knowledge by our own efforts. This not only limits our capacity to know God, but even to follow the Delphic maxim to "know ourselves." As Augustine saw, if our souls are made in the image of God, then they too are incomprehensible to us. Here Platonism and Christianity cohere, for unlike the Aristotelian empiricists, both Plato and St Paul were wary of the evidence of our senses. Our self-reflection is unreliable. We must go beyond reflection, beyond cognition, to embrace a foolish unknowing if we are to enter into the wisdom of God.

Both the Catholic and Reformed churches of the West have adopted St Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin and the recognition that we humans are unable to save ourselves. We must depend entirely on divine grace. Despite

47 Christopher Jamison, *Finding Happiness: Monastic Steps for a Fulfilling Life* (London: Orion, 2008).

48 1 Cor 1:25.

this, Western Christianity has often lapsed into systems of moralism that reify evil and imply that we are able to save ourselves from it. Conversion from sin still ends up being understood as a personal choice, a test of our individual moral sternness. To this day, advertisers exploit this in their marketing of temptation and "harmless" indulgence. Sin is seen as a kind of naughtiness that we can exorcise with the right regime. We can have the cake as long as we go to the gym afterwards; take the long-haul flight as long as we plant a tree. Mechanistic interpretations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation have not helped to dispel this popular image of religion as a kind of spiritual calorie-counting. Hence the popular image of Catholics sinning all week, going to Confession and Mass for a weekly top-up of forgiveness, and then getting back to bad habits.

Yet for Platonists, including St Augustine himself, evil is not so much a reality as a deficiency of reality — that is, of the true reality, which is God. Evil is an absence, a lack of divine goodness. This is more than just a Platonic trope. In the Greek of the New Testament, sin is called *hamartia*, a term used in archery to mean "missing the mark." For Dionysius, the Christian response to sin is not just self-chastisement and trying to do better next time. It is, rather, bound up in the realization of the reality of Divine Goodness and the awakening of our need, our desire, and our love for God. Repentance is not just "saying sorry," but a turning of our entire deficient being towards the full reality, and hence absolute goodness, of the One who is Being beyond Being.

Here we might turn the sculpting metaphor around and make ourselves the blocks. Oriented towards God, we let him sculpt away all the attachments to non-being that weigh us down, carve and smooth us into a nearer representation of his divine image as self-giving One, the Christ whose image lies buried within the stone of human hearts.

The Areopagite calls us not only to see our sin, but to develop the sense of our absolute need for and dependence upon God: a corrective to the modern technocracy that ravages the world with its inventions and does not see the irony in trying to cure the world by the same means. This puts our individual sin into its wider context. I do not mean the all-too-human sense of "structural sin" popularized by Liberation theology, with the semi-Pelagian implication that we humans can "solve" the problem of evil once and for all by the manipulation of social conditions. We are fundamentally incapable of perfection, not because we differ from God in scale, but because perfection resides in God alone. This is a metaphysical point before it becomes a social one.

Dionysius chose the name of the Athenian convert to show his commitment to the philosophy of the Platonists, but his pseudonym is just as much a marker of his Christian faith. Pseudonymity is the first challenge to those who would walk the Areopagite's path. It constitutes a call to absolute humility, to walking the Way of the Cross with no concern for one's own glory, to putting all earthly pride and approval aside for the sole aim of aspiring to mystical oneness with God in love; to emptying ourselves that we may live, and so to become one with the eternal, creative life of self-emptying, which is God revealed in Christ Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, and Ascended.

The call of the Areopagite does not end in some quest for personal holiness via Platonic meditations upon the nature of God. It is not a call for a secret Christian spiritual elite to engage in mind-bending acts of intellectual acrobatics. Far from it. The Areopagite's negative way frames the self-emptying God revealed in Christ in terms of Platonic metaphysics, but then builds on that foundation to reveal the Church as the vehicle of salvation, the communal, sacramental, and liturgical means of opening this negative way to all believers. Exploring this will help us understand who he is, who he wants us to be, and how his way can reconnect the West to the wider world.

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